

# **Understanding ‘belonging’ among undergraduate residential students: A Lacanian perspective**

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the  
University of Chester for the degree of Doctor of Education

by Delyth Ann Hughes

March 2016

# ***Understanding ‘belonging’ among undergraduate residential students: A Lacanian perspective***      by Delyth Hughes

## **Abstract**

This thesis seeks to understand how the notion of belonging is experienced by undergraduate residential students.

Framing the research against the influence of neo-liberal policy and practices, this study employs a phenomenological approach and theorises the data using a poststructural framework. Throughout the thesis aspects of Lacanian theory are utilised as an interpretive lens, chosen for its ability to reveal that which is usually concealed.

Beginning with an exploration of the reasons that ‘belonging to a university community’ is of interest to higher education student support practitioners, I conclude that this is a result of the therapeutic culture we are currently experiencing in education, along with a need to bring together a heterogeneous group of students who do not seemingly ‘belong’ together. This need comes from a desire to maintain higher education in its position as an elite pursuit which guarantees a better life. Yet paradoxically, in the current economic context, the achievement of a degree qualification can no longer guarantee a better life. Notions of belonging and community are therefore argued to be important in this context, as they serve to retain students and meet government objectives (which are to increase the number of students in higher education, thus sustaining the UK’s edge in a competitive global market).

The data from nine participant interviews is analysed and interpreted through a poststructural lens. A poststructural framework is chosen based on my own experiences as a practitioner in this field: that our student support interventions which aim to engender a sense of belonging and community in students are somewhat flawed. Thus, my aim in this thesis is to understand from the students themselves how they experience belonging and community, and in doing so, understand if our University practices have had a part to play in this.

Data from participant interviews reveals the themes of ‘stories, memories and rituals’, ‘place and home’ and ‘social networks’ and these are analysed with specific reference to Lacanian psychoanalysis, along with other theorists where relevant. Lacan is chosen as aspects of his theory allow me to take account of unconscious human drives, therefore revealing more than language can alone, and providing a more holistic understanding of how the phenomena are experienced.

This thesis concludes with a phenomenological description of belonging, which is a pastiche of my participants’ voices. From this I draw the conclusion that the notion of ‘belonging to a university community’ is largely fictive, and symptomatic of a neo-liberal influence. I contend that experiences related to me by the participants suggest that ‘belonging’ is experienced in a way which is independent of any university interventions, and that ‘community’ is not recognised by students as anything other than a familiarity with their surroundings. I end the thesis with recommendations for student support practitioners and with a reflection on my research journey.

## **Summary of portfolio**

In this section I set the thesis in the context of the other work I have submitted for the EdD programme. I have provided each module title along with a brief summary of the assessment I produced. This section will help the reader to understand how I reached the starting point for the final thesis topic.

### **Research Methods for Professional Enquiry**

For the first assessment I used a case study approach to understand the ethical principles which staff in student support in higher education use in their decision making when faced with complex situations relating to students. I concluded that the approach used broadly fitted within a deontological framework, with a particular reliance on the use of 'practical wisdom' (Dalton, 2002) in novel situations.

### **Social Theory & Education: Key Issues and Debates**

In this assessment I looked at the notion that the culture in higher education could prove to be a barrier to students from a working class background. I specifically drew on Bourdieu and Passeron's 1977 work 'Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture', and Bernstein's (2000) work, 'Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity' to look at how social class may influence a student's experiences at university, relating the theories to my own experiences with students who had decided to withdraw early from their programme of study.

### **Creativity in Practice**

I produced a story for this assessment, which was based on my experience of a one- to-one interview with a student who had lost his mother. I explored the inner monologue I have in this situation and contrasted it with the dialogue I had with the student concerned, which recognised our relationship as professional. By taking this approach I highlighted the tensions entailed in providing a professional response to an emotional situation.

### **Policy Analysis for Integrated Services**

The 2011 Government White Paper "Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System" was the focus of this assessment. I used Scott's (2000) framework for reading policy texts to 'read' the policy from the point of view of the marketization of higher education. I reviewed this policy's 'textual intervention[s] into practice' (Ball, 2006, p.46) by examining its impact on my professional area of student support, with particular emphasis on new 'performance measure' practices. I looked at the potential negative impact of this policy on students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **Institutions, Discontinuities and Systems of Thought**

For this assessment I looked at students who leave university citing 'feelings of isolation' as their main reason for leaving. I used Baudrillard's (1983) concept of simulation and Barthes' (1982) mythology to argue that in our quest for continuous improvement, we are producing a university culture which does not recognise the needs of those who want to attend university to learn for the sake of learning. I contended that 'feelings of isolation' occur for those students who do not engage with the 'expected' university culture, which is promoted through various media and further reproduced when students arrive at university.

## **Acknowledgements**

Firstly, I would like to thank my husband Adam, and the rest of my family, for their ongoing support and encouragement over the past six years.

I would also like to thank my supervisors Professor Dean Garratt and Dr Paul Moran for their expert guidance, support and patience throughout the development of this thesis.

Without my interviewees this work could not have taken place and I wish to thank them all for the time they gave to me so generously.

Finally, for the faith and moral support of my work colleagues I am extremely appreciative. In particular I wish to thank Rev Dr Lesley Cooke who inspired me to join the EdD programme and whose ongoing interest in my studies has been motivational throughout.

# Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Summary of portfolio .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
1.1 Background to choice of topic .....	1
1.2 Positioning myself within the research .....	1
1.3 Thesis structure .....	3
1.4 Positioning my research in the field – the gap in current literature.....	4
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	6
2.1 Belonging.....	6
2.1.2 Belonging and education.....	8
2.1.3 Belonging to a community .....	10
2.2 Nancy and community.....	13
2.3 Belonging and poststructuralism .....	16
2.4 Summary .....	17
Chapter 3: Problematizing Belonging .....	18
3.1 Introduction .....	18
3.2 Higher education context .....	18
3.2.1 The neo-liberal era .....	21
3.3 Zizek, higher education and student support.....	25
3.4 Student support services and the changing understanding of student agency .....	27
3.5 Summary .....	31
Chapter 4: Engaging with Practitioner Research .....	33
4.1 Introduction .....	33
4.1.2 Research question .....	33
4.2 Research design .....	42
4.3 Reflexive approach .....	44
4.4 Ethical considerations .....	48
4.5 Summary .....	49
Chapter 5: Discussion .....	51
5.1 Introduction .....	51
5.2 Lacan .....	51
5.2.2 Overview of Lacan's theory .....	52
5.3 Themes.....	54

5.3.1 Stories, memories and rituals .....	54
5.3.2 Place and home .....	62
5.3.3 Social networks / family and friends .....	70
5.4 Community.....	76
5.5 Summary .....	82
Chapter 6: Implications for Student Support.....	85
6.1 Introduction .....	85
6.2 Addressing the research aims.....	85
6.3 Lacan and the practitioner.....	88
6.4 Implications for practice .....	92
6.4.1 Place and home .....	93
6.4.2 Social networks.....	95
6.4.3 Stories, memories and rituals.....	97
6.4.4 Community.....	98
6.5 Conclusion .....	99
6.5.1 Limitations and opportunities for future research.....	100
6.5.2 Reflections on my research experience.....	101
References .....	104

# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

## **1.1 Background to choice of topic**

The motivation for my thesis, to develop an understanding of the notion of 'belonging' within the higher education context, is driven by both the professional area in which I work and by the interest I have developed in this topic over the first three years of the taught element of the Doctorate in Education. Each of the assignments that I produced for the EdD explored the student experience (usually the experience of 'isolated' or disadvantaged students) through the viewpoints of a variety of different theorists, including Barthes, Bourdieu and Baudrillard. These assignments provided me with new insights and different ways of framing the student experience. However, all of the assignments had been desk based and I had not yet researched students' experiences through their own words. Hence, this is a project which I hope will illuminate the meaning given by undergraduate residential students to their experiences of belonging to a university<sup>1</sup> community. I will be framing this research against the backdrop of the neo-liberal environment which universities are currently operating within.

## **1.2 Positioning myself within the research**

Professionally, I am a manager within a student services team, which, as a central support service within the University, is a place where students can access help and support when they need to. Some students proactively contact us, while others are referred to us, for example, local GP surgeries may refer students to the counselling service or Personal Academic Tutors might refer students to one of our teams. As a general rule, students will access our services because they are experiencing some kind of problem. This can range from problems with housemates and homesickness, to the more serious issues such as bereavement, feeling suicidal or rape. Due to the sensitive nature of the issues we deal with, all staff are trained in areas such as data protection, equality and diversity, and confidentiality. Fundamentally, our role in

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis, 'university' is used to denote universities in general, whereas 'University' is used to denote the institution in which I work.

student support is to provide the necessary help, advice or 'intervention' which will enable a student to stay at the University.

I have worked in this area for ten years and my interest in 'belonging' and 'community' has grown over time with the different roles I have worked in. My first role involved responsibility for interviewing students who had decided to leave the University and I was particularly interested to understand the experience of those students who stated to me that their decision to leave was based on a feeling that they 'do not belong' at University. I found this reason for leaving particularly troubling and felt a responsibility to do more to stop this from happening. In subsequent roles I have had the opportunity to participate in projects which have tried to tackle this apparent absence or lack of a sense of belonging.

As a student support practitioner there are controls which influence and monitor the work that I do. Data protection, confidentiality, risk assessments, the concept of vulnerable adults and safeguarding, diversity and equality legislation all play a large part in underpinning the area of student support, and very often the idea of protecting the University's reputation runs throughout our dealings with students. Our role in student support provides for the 'other' side of University life, the often messy and complex area of the non-academic.

In terms of belonging and community in higher education, there is an inevitable tension which exists between the administrative functions which have brought together a group of students from different cultures, religions, and social classes, and the University's wish to form a community, as well as a sense of belonging which encompasses these students and ensures their allegiance. The goal here could be argued to be economic and linked with the pressure to retain students until the conclusion of their studies. Yet it could also be based on a sense of security, similar to Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs, the assumed need for the security of the student as well as the need for the security of the University. For students who belong to us, and us to them, must surely provide for the longevity of the University and its endorsement for future generations of students.

Student services departments and professionals often hold some responsibility for the 'student experience'. This responsibility, whilst acknowledging that there are multiple student experiences, also assumes that there is a 'student' identity. In recent



years, the concept of 'belonging' has also crept in to the discourses used when we talk of the student experience and strategies for engaging students and, perhaps more importantly, retaining them until the conclusion of their studies. It is with this emphasis on 'belonging' that my interest sits, and understanding how this manifests itself for students.

I have decided to focus my thesis on a phenomenological understanding of how the notion of belonging is given meaning by undergraduate residential students at my own University. The motivation to study this area is underpinned by my belief that there are complexities at play which render our own interventions in student support inadequate. I hope that this thesis is able to illuminate some of these complexities and in turn contribute to our understanding of how the phenomenon of 'belongingness' is given meaning by students within the University context. I will review the students' experiences against a poststructural framework using aspects of Lacan's theory. This approach supports the position, based on my professional experience, that university corporate strategies and practices which aim to engender a sense of belonging prove inadequate, and are the result of external influences which are removed from the lived experience of students. This thesis will contribute to knowledge on student belonging through the adopted Lacanian analysis and poststructural framework.

### **1.3 Thesis structure**

The thesis follows a traditional structure, which I outline below.

Following this introduction, the second chapter reviews the concepts of belonging and community, both generally and as they relate to higher education. I also look in detail at Nancy's (1991) concept of community, as a possible framework for understanding community in the higher education context.

The third chapter of this thesis problematizes the notion of 'belonging within a university community'. In this chapter I investigate the possible reasons for this notion gaining prominence in higher education in recent years.

The fourth chapter provides an explanation for my choice of phenomenology as the methodology for this thesis which is situated in practice. This chapter also introduces my reasons for choosing a poststructuralist lens through which to analyse my

research data, a lens which enables me to provide an understanding which is predicated on my taking up a particular position within the cultural web of meanings of which I am part.

Chapter five is the Discussion chapter, where the themes drawn out from participant interviews are discussed through a Lacanian lens, which provides a poststructuralist view on the concepts of community and belonging in higher education.

The final chapter provides an overview of the implications for practice arising from this research, and offers recommendations for student support practitioners as well as some final thoughts on the research process.

#### **1.4 Positioning my research in the field – the gap in current literature**

Much of the research into 'belonging' in a university environment looks at the experience of non-traditional entrants to higher education (see for example Johnson, et al., 2007), or it focuses on empirical measures of belonging (see for example Bollen & Hoyle, 1990). The work on non-traditional entrants tends to be driven by a focus on habitus: that is, a belief that those who do not fit the dominant understanding of a student (young; middle class; residential) will struggle in some way to belong. Bourdieu and Waquant state that when 'habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a "fish in water": it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992, p.127). The notion of belonging is usually presented as a 'broad brush', encompassing all students, whereas my experience shows that 'traditional' residential undergraduate students also struggle, at times, to feel a sense of belonging to the University. They may also experience this notion in a way that differs from our professional understandings.

I would therefore like to understand how belonging is experienced by the 'traditional' entrants to higher education, those who are considered to be a "fish in water" by interviewing them about their experiences, in order to understand how this often ignored student group experience a sense of belonging. This will influence my practice by providing me with an understanding which will guide any future interventions or project I am involved in, which has the aim of enhancing students' experiences of belonging to a university community.

My research, therefore, focuses on the experience of traditional undergraduate students who are in their first year at the University and are living in University-owned residential accommodation. The Independent Newspaper reported that the advent of higher tuition fees has not deterred students from moving away from home, in fact there has been a slight increase in the numbers wanting to move away from home (Garner, 2013). I am keen to understand the way that a sense of belonging is experienced by this student group as it is a group which is often assumed to have a sense of belonging in the way that, for example, commuting students or mature students do not. Because of this, they are also not usually the focus of our student support interventions. Thus, I hope that the originality of this research will make an important contribution to the growing body of knowledge on belonging in higher education by providing a better understanding of the first year residential student experience of belonging, and the utilisation of a Lacanian framework to shed light on this understanding.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this section of the thesis I will give an overview of the terms 'belonging' and 'community', along with a review of current literature in the field of higher education which has looked at these themes previously.

### 2.1 Belonging

The full dictionary definition of 'belong' is as follows:

#### Full Definition of BELONG

*intransitive verb*

**1a** : to be suitable, appropriate, or advantageous <a dictionary *belongs* in every home>

**b** : to be in a proper situation <a man of his ability *belongs* in teaching>

**2a** : to be the property of a person or thing —used with *to* <the book *belongs* to me>

**b** : to be attached or bound by birth, allegiance, or dependency —usually used with *to* <they *belong* to their homeland>

**c** : to be a member of a club, organization, or set —usually used with *to* <she *belongs* to a country club>

**3** : to be an attribute, part, adjunct, or function of a person or thing <nuts and bolts *belong* to a car>

**4** : to be properly classified

(Merriam-Webster.com. n.d.)

The variety of ways in which this word, and its derivatives, can be used is what makes this notion of interest to me when it is used in the context of the university and applied to the experience of students. A wider review of the literature confirms that there is not one absolute definition for the notion of 'belonging'. Instead, the concept of belonging can be categorised in a variety of ways, including: a psychological sense of belonging based on experience; belonging which is practically demonstrated through the enactment of behaviours and traditions; and a philosophical understanding of 'belonging' which links itself to notions of identity and

performativity. By recognising that there is not one absolute definition, this study aims to draw out some general themes which originate from how students understand the notion of belonging from their own experience. However, before starting the study it is important to review the wider body of literature relating to the notion of belonging.

The wish to belong has long been established as a fundamental human need, perhaps most popularly described in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, where the need to belong is categorised as being second only to physiological needs and safety.

Maslow states that

'we still underplay the deep importance of the neighbourhood, of one's territory, of one's clan, of one's "kind", one's class, one's gang, and one's familiar working colleagues... our deeply animal tendency to herd, to flock, to join, to belong' (Maslow, 1970, p.44).

Within a university environment, the physiological and safety needs are largely catered for through the provision of modern halls of residence, campus security teams and even hardship funding for those in financial need. However, cultivating the need to belong continues to be an area of interest in higher education and something that is believed to need management and intervention. Within the higher education sector, belonging has been directly linked to retaining students which makes it of key importance for many universities. Thomas writes that 'improving student belonging should be a priority for all programmes, departments and institutions' (Thomas, 2012, p.12).

Baumeister and Leary are also supporters of the belief that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation. They define belonging as the drive to satisfy two criteria:

'First, there is a need for frequent, affectively pleasant interactions with a few other people, and, second, these interactions must take place in the context of a temporally stable and enduring framework of affective concern for each other's welfare' (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p.497).

This view of belonging is situated within a need for human relationships which go beyond the surface level; belonging is achieved when others demonstrate a real

interest in one's well-being, and a failure to experience positive relationships may lead to isolation and loneliness. Similar to Maslow's work, the quality of positive relationships with others and the idea of human connectedness is key to satisfying a sense of belonging.

Other psychologists who have drawn on the concept of belonging within their theories include Bowlby whose work on attachment theory has been extremely influential and links with the work of both Maslow and Baumeister and Leary. For Bowlby, attachment theory refers to 'the propensity to make intimate emotional bonds to particular individuals as a basic component of human nature, already present in germinal form in the neonate and continuing through adult life into old age' (Bowlby, 1988, p.136). For Bowlby, attachment theory and a sense of belonging is a significant determinant to someone's behaviours and wellbeing and is also deeply rooted in a positive relationship with others.

### **2.1.2 Belonging and education**

Given the wide reaching impact a sense of belonging has on wellbeing, as outlined in the brief overview above, it is unsurprising that studies looking at a sense of belonging exist in the sphere of education. This section of the thesis thus provides a summary of studies concerned with belonging in the context of education.

Diane Reay (2001) has taken Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital and related them to the university environment. Her research has demonstrated a link between belonging to the place (university) and a person's class identity. She argues that power in the field of education is clearly located with the middle / higher classes and states that, 'within the educational system all the authority remains vested in the middle classes. Not only do they run the system, the system itself is one which valorizes middle rather than working-class cultural capital' (Reay, 2001, p.334). Moreover, she argues that those whose habitus closely mirrors the middle class habitus of the university environment will fit in better (or find that they belong more easily) than those who come from a working class background. This provides an interesting perspective through which to understand the notion of belonging among undergraduates, suggesting that feelings of belonging are going to be stronger for those students who identify themselves with the middle-class group.

Thomas (2002) also uses Bourdieu's concept of habitus for understanding the impact of an institution's habitus on the experience of students. She notes that, 'educational institutions favour knowledge and experiences of dominant social groups (e.g. white, middle-class men) to the detriment of other groups ... the education system is socially and culturally biased' (Thomas, 2002, p.431). She explains how higher education institutions are able to legitimise their power through an ability to set their own values, boundaries around legitimate knowledge and further award qualifications on the basis of successful acquisition and employment of this prevailing knowledge. This strongly suggests that if students feel at odds with the community that they find themselves in, and if they feel that their own personal cultural capital is of weak currency, then persisting to complete their qualifications will be a challenge.

Other studies within the field have identified a compelling link between students' sense of belonging and their motivation. Freeman et al (2007) found positive links between students' sense of belonging and their academic self-efficacy, motivation and sense of social acceptance. Bollen and Hoyle (1990) conducted an empirical study on a small college campus which found a correlation between a sense of belonging and feelings of morale. Both of these studies have demonstrated the benefits of a sense of belonging at both the institutional and the individual level.

Along the same theme, Hausmann et al. (2009, p.650) argue that 'when students become integrated into the social and academic systems of the university, they develop a psychological sense of belonging to the university community, which is an important precursor to desirable outcomes such as increased commitment and persistence'. Their research further found 'students' sense of belonging to the university community as a significant determinant of their commitment to the university, their intentions to persist, and their actual persistence' (ibid., p.667), and interestingly, their interventions had a larger, more pronounced success rate for white students than African American students, which they believe is due to the reduced sense of belonging this student group has at the outset.

Pittman and Richmond conducted research with university students and found that 'sense of belonging, like the related construct of social acceptance, was associated with feelings about oneself rather than actual behaviors' (2008, p.358), and was

correlated to the quality of friendships which the student had. This approach to belonging suggests that it is multi-faceted and based on both the emotional and social aspects of experience at university.

Osterman (2000) found a profound link between a sense of community and a sense of belonging within the education environment. A comprehensive review of the literature on community and belonging within education highlighted that feelings of belongingness and a sense of community had positive outcomes for student success, motivation, engagement, academic achievement, autonomy and self-regulation as well as positive attitudes towards self and others. However, Osterman also identified that some students fail to experience a sense of belongingness which is characteristic of community, namely 'while they may have a shared emotional connection and recognize the group's importance to them, their needs to experience relatedness are not always addressed' (2000, p.360). Thus leading to the more damaging experiences of rejection and alienation.

As already noted, the current literature within the field of higher education and student retention has put an increased emphasis on the importance of instilling a sense of belonging within new undergraduate students. However, this is not a new phenomenon. It echoes much earlier work in the area of student retention produced by Tinto, who developed a Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1975) which identified that student withdrawal was related to the level of integration of the student into different aspects of university life, namely academic and social, along with other factors such as commitment to the degree programme. However, as Tinto highlights more than thirty years on, 'most institutions have not yet been able to translate what we know about student retention into forms of action that have led to substantial gain in student persistence and graduation' (2007, p.5). This, to me, signifies the importance of returning to the student to understand their perspective on belonging, using a phenomenological approach.

### **2.1.3 Belonging to a community**

As indicated in the review above, belonging and community are generally understood to be intertwined; this is also the situation in higher education – we understand belonging in the context of a university community. Much of the policy documents within the University describe both students and staff as belonging to a



community, which, in this context, has the outcome of establishing that membership of this community makes one subject to the rules, regulations and policies of this community. Belonging to the community in this sense is about focusing on the responsibilities of the individuals. It also suggests that all are not equal within the university community; indeed, the power resides with the university administrators who have the ability to impose the regulations on others in the community. McNay (2005) describes university communities as being based on continuity, shared memory and communication and celebration, which suggests a wholly positive model for understanding community within higher education.

Within student support, we often emphasise that a sense of belonging to the university community is vital if students are to get the most out of their student experience. However, community is an interesting notion to conceptualise in an institution of 18,000 individuals – the process of (and possibility of) belonging to this community should be problematized. McNay warns that ‘students find their identity locally, and so do most staff. It is only senior managers and administrators with cross-institutional functions who have a primary identity with the total organisation’ (2005, p.43).

If one considers university to be a structure, within a determined spatial area, and the idea of ‘student’ being a specific identity which is adopted within this community, then the idea of a ‘university community’ has a logical possibility. However, in the current context, universities are striving to manage the idea of the university community. By promoting the idea of a university community, the university could be argued to be promoting an idea of exclusivity, identity and shared goals. This idea of community is thus aligned with the political conception of community, which has as its foundation an authoritarian slant, ‘The total community is a regulated moral totality that is a creation of human design rather than being the product of tradition’ (Delanty, 2003, p.24).

The notion of a university community can also be understood through the idea of the symbolic order<sup>2</sup>, which Cohen describes as a 'cluster of symbolic and ideological map references with which the individual is socially oriented' (Cohen, 1985, p.58). In terms of a university, the particular language (seminars, lectures), and ceremonies such as Freshers' Week and Graduation mark the university as being particular and independent of what goes on outside of it. These symbolic rituals serve to maintain the idea of the university community. This view of community is flexible, because if community rests in the symbolic rather than external reality, then it can change and be interpreted in different ways by different people<sup>3</sup>.

Bauman's (2001) view of community is clouded with a scepticism which comes from his belief that community is an illusion and can deliver only nostalgia; a longing for what there once was. According to Bauman, our longing for community is based on our human need for a sense of security, and in the current age this is a longing which is ever more present. The work by Liz Thomas (2012) on retention seems to be appealing to the creation of the nostalgic sense of community, where knowing everyone's name is important. As the nostalgic community is argued to be impossible in the current day it is possible that trying to impose this on people creates a sense of 'otherness' that is negative to the idea of community.

The nostalgic appeal of the community may also have an appeal to the residential students who are the focus of my study, as they will have left their family homes to come to University. The human drive to have a sense of 'belonging' described in the first part of this chapter may provide the University with an opportunity to do this through its interventions. However, at this point I will move on to discuss Jean-Luc Nancy's (1991) conception of community, which warns us that trying to impose (the concept of) community (immanence) can only lead to destruction. It is through Nancy's conception of community that I will be reviewing my participant data where it relates to the phenomenon of community. I have chosen Nancy's work as it fits with

---

<sup>2</sup> The notion of the 'symbolic' plays a significant part in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, which is used as an interpretive lens in the Discussion chapter of this thesis. It is included here as a precursor to the chapters which follow.

<sup>3</sup> The notion that community can be experienced in different ways through the symbolic is linked to the Lacanian theory that the symbolic is mediated through language. On this understanding of the symbolic, we can see that culture and personal histories, for example, will influence human experience.

my own experiences of students who feel that they do not belong to the University community, and for whom our student support interventions are ineffective. I will expand on these experiences in chapter three of this thesis.

## **2.2 Nancy and community**

Jean-Luc Nancy presents a philosophy of community in his book: *The Inoperative Community* (1991). His philosophy of community begins by considering the individual which he defines as the indivisible atom, 'the indivisible – the individual reveals that it is the abstract result of a decomposition' (Nancy, 1991, p.3). His account of the individual results in the statement that in community, the individual is a logical impossibility, as 'the logic of the absolute violates the absolute' (ibid., p.4), and as a human cannot be defined as being 'absolute' they cannot be defined as being an individual.

According to Nancy, as humans cannot be alone in our aloneness (a logical impossibility), we are therefore not pre-constituted as individuals. Instead we are constituted through our relations with others. We are constituted through our being-in community, 'community means, consequently, that there is no singular being without another singular being' (ibid., p.28). By being, we are in community and this is what should define community according to Nancy. 'The relation (the community) is, if it is, nothing other than what undoes, in its very principle – and at its closure or on its limit – the autarchy of absolute immanence' (ibid., p.4). This suggests that community realises itself in the very undoing of the absolute immanence. Furthermore, being, as finite, necessitates community; if one is mortal and therefore finite, one is in community.

Community for Nancy cannot be founded upon the sharing of common characteristics. He uses the argument of 'immanence' to make this point, as any true characteristic which could be said to bind a community together could only be achieved in death, and therefore he argues that 'Immanence, communal fusion, contains no other logic than that of the suicide of the community that is governed by it' (ibid., p.12). Community conceived in this way can only be achieved in death, as Nancy argues that when individuals are alive, they can never be closed off from others (either themselves or as a community).

In Nancy's definition, community reveals itself in the knowledge of our own singularity and mortality. The impossibility of community is presented to us through our own acknowledgement of our birth, death and there being nothing more. There is no reference to any sense of belonging in Nancy's conception of community, and this resistance to defining community by any characteristics is exemplified in the following, 'Community is given to us – or we are given and abandoned to the community: a gift to be renewed and communicated, it is not a work to be done or produced' (ibid., p.35). This suggests that attempts to enforce boundaries, characteristics or any identity to a university community would be irresponsible.

Instead, the concept of sharing is used to describe community in a way which avoids Nancy's fear of totalitarianism. For Nancy, 'sharing is always incomplete, or it is beyond completion and incompleteness. For a complete sharing implies the disappearance of what is shared' (ibid., p.35). Community, as understood through the concept of sharing, is the sharing of no defined set of characteristics. 'In society ... in every society and at every moment, "community" is in fact nothing other than a consumption of the social or fabric – but a consumption that occurs in this bond and in accordance with the sharing of the finitude of singular beings' (ibid., p.37). This way of conceiving community avoids the idea of totalitarianism, as any community which achieved immanence would become individual, and therefore could no longer be-in community. For Nancy, community is defined through people sharing of themselves rather than narrowly focussing itself on a shared characteristic.

In terms of applying this philosophical understanding of community to universities, I can see the dangers of trying to impose a particular notion of community onto the students who study with us. By trying to impose a structure around the University community, a structure which is contingent on particular characteristics, we risk necessarily 'othering' people who do not fit the mould (which is worryingly possible given the diversity in the student population today). Those who are at the margins of the University community, and do not see themselves reflected within the characteristics of the mass produced 'student', will likely feel that they do not belong within this community. Thus, we would necessarily be creating our own demise, as in advocating a narrow concept of the University community we risk destroying anything outside of ourselves.

As Nancy advocates that people are 'in community' by virtue of their finitude, this does lead one to question whether there is a rational driver for universities to provide interventions into the creation of a specific 'university community'. This also raises questions as to whether belongingness as a concept is a relevant concern to have, for Nancy would argue that the aim of having a unified university community for students to belong to is an impossible goal and hence a futile enterprise.

However, student support teams aim to ensure an inclusive environment and often have a remit for supporting the diversity and equality agendas. Certain qualities and characteristics (for example, a minimum level of education) have to be in place in order for one to be part of the university community, as in the context of the university by its very nature you have to meet certain qualifying requirements in order to be allowed entry into this community. However, once the entry requirements have been met, notions of university community do continue to persist and should be explored further in order to understand their impact on students' experiences of belonging.

The wish to create a community to which the student belongs is an objective for the University (its administrative functions) as it is hoped that belongingness will result in commitment from the students – both a commitment to complete the course and a commitment to the University in the broader sense of promoting it in a positive way (for example through National Student Survey results) and to act as a word-of-mouth marketer in the competitive marketplace in which universities operate. The difficulty from Nancy's point of view is trying to create a sense of community with each new university entrant, for according to him being is the spontaneous co-appearance of self and Other, individual and community, of the being and being-with. This leads him to state that:

'it is not a matter of making, producing or instituting a community; nor is it a matter of venerating or fearing within it a sacred power – it is a matter of incompleting its sharing' (Nancy, 1991, p.35).

This 'sharing' and necessary incompleteness renders the community inoperative; instead sharing remains fundamental to what humans are and therefore community should not be understood as a project.

Returning to the notion of belongingness within a university community, an understanding of how students experience this phenomenon provides an opportunity to test out Nancy's theory, which suggests that providing a narrow focus of community which is orientated on particular goals (such as achieving an excellent degree, having a fantastic social life) is detrimental to, and ignorant of, the idea of the compearance of self and other. Narrow focus will inevitably lead to the death of community. The research participants within my project will be helpful here in providing an understanding of how community is experienced by them, and whether they feel there is an overt understanding of the University community.

As a student support practitioner, Nancy's work provides an opportunity to reflect on my own approach to student belongingness. If a student presents themselves to us as feeling isolated, or feeling that they do not belong, it may be helpful to understand where their focus is. For example, are they focussing this feeling on their lack of a social life, without appreciating the wider web of opportunities that the university experience presents to them? If a student cites a poor social life as their problem, and an intervention to resolve this is offered, we are arguably guilty of perpetuating a narrow focus of the student experience and of trying to assimilate the student into a culture which does not appreciate their own personal history. In so doing, we further risk making the formation of a university community our project, for as Nancy argues, 'A community is not a project of fusion, or in some general way a productive or operative project – nor is it a project at all' (1991, p.15). We need to understand whether students experience university as a common-being or being-in-common, and whether for those who feel isolated, Nancy's belief that 'in place of such a communion there is communication' (ibid., p.28), is something which they also fail to experience.

### **2.3 Belonging and poststructuralism**

The theoretical framework of poststructuralism is posited with enabling the practitioner, 'to see experiences, including those that occur within the workplace, as open to contradictory and conflicting interpretations' (Brown & Jones, 2001, p.6) revealing the possibility that there is another way to 'be' existing outside of our day to day practices. As a theoretical position, it is relevant to my study as it aims to 'tease the reader to seek the self which has been concealed the better to be revealed' (Bannet, 1989, p.1). This fits with my belief that our current student support practices

around belonging and community are inadequate and do not take into account the actual experiences of students.

As a practitioner undertaking research within my own work area, this approach allows me to investigate an area which I have found troubling, in a manner which enables me to question 'taken for granted' practices, which have become culturally accepted. Whilst this thesis aims to provide a phenomenological understanding of the student experience of belonging to a university community, it will also, through chapter three, aim to provide an explanation of how notions of belonging have become part of our focus in student support.

## **2.4 Summary**

As this brief review of some of the literature on belonging has shown, psychology, social science and philosophy identify belonging as being an important and influencing factor in human life. Indeed, the variety of ways in which belonging is conceptualised highlights the difficulty to me of understanding just what belonging means to new undergraduate students who have moved away from home and are starting a new chapter in their lives. Something which the conceptions of belonging that I have looked at in this review have in common is the relationship between the individual and their internal psychology (being) and place. For my particular study, place is defined as the University. For this reason, I will be undertaking this study within the phenomenological paradigm, which places special emphasis on being and place. It also recognises the importance of subjective human experience, which I am particularly interested in and which I explore in further detail in the Discussion chapter.

## **Chapter 3: Problematizing Belonging**

### **3.1 Introduction**

As demonstrated in the literature review, the concept of 'belonging' is something which universities are increasingly concerning themselves with. In order to engage with this phenomenon at a deeper level I first need to take a step back and consider the broader and deeper assumptions held within higher education at present which have contributed to a belief that we should be actively taking notice and managing this notion of 'belonging', and, with this, the role that student support services have taken.

This chapter considers the wider higher education context, the changing nature of the student population, the changing relationship of the student to the university and the developing role of student support services. It further relates how these elements have combined to enable 'belonging' to appear in our discourse on and within higher education. These topics will be reviewed against a neo-liberal background, utilising a poststructural framework therefore 'problematizing' the issues in order to make sense of them.

### **3.2 Higher education context**

For the purpose of this thesis, I will begin my review of the higher education context with the 1960s, where higher education policy was focused on 'healing social divisions in UK society, as well as having a critical role in preparing the labour force to meet the UK's future economic needs' (Walsh, Stephens and Moore, 2000, p.49). This approach supports the belief that 'social divisions' are a negative thing, and views higher education as being critical to 'healing' them.

Higher education up until this point had largely been the domain of the elite and was a site for social reproduction which enabled, to a certain degree, power and wealth within society to remain the preserve of the elite. This is described by Reay (2001, p.334) as follows, 'the schooling of the working classes was always to be subordinate and inferior to that of the bourgeoisie; a palliative designed to contain and pacify'. By taking the approach that higher education should heal social divisions, government, operating via the post-war framework of the welfare state (Garratt & Forrester, 2012) aimed to extend access to higher education and therefore reduce societal differentiation, as education 'was regarded as the means



by which society's inequalities and problems could be tackled and bring about social change and a socially just society' (ibid., p.49). In terms of the concept of 'belonging' in higher education, this era represented an opportunity— where increased access to higher education enabled the elite to extend their practices into the other classes of society, thereby maintaining an institution which had been key in sustaining their social advantage during a time when the UK's changing economic environment demanded an increase in its educated work force. This was to be a workforce which would support the British economy in its move to a global sphere; a workforce which needed to meet the economy's demand for new education and skills (ibid., 2012).

One of the key changes in the 1960s came in the form of the Robbins Report (1963) which recommended a shift in higher education from being largely the preserve of the elite, to a mass system where 'courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so' (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p.8). Marginson (1997, p.122) states that this period of time was the 'programming of education as a site of social investment and democratic modernisation, based on collective financing, in which market exchange was minor'. In effect, higher education was viewed as a public good, and was not yet rooted in the neo-liberal choice making individuality of today, where the individual is making a financial investment in themselves and is encouraged to exercise their freedom of choice when choosing the university they want to study at. The Robbins report marked the start of a shift which resulted in the mass system which we have today.

Following the Robbins report, the next significant change in the approach to higher education came in the 1970s, when competitive advantage on an international level was linked to the UK having an educated labour force which could compete in a global market. Foskett states that 'we can trace the transition point quite precisely to the Ruskin College speech by Prime Minister James Callaghan (1976), in which he started a national debate on the nature, purpose and success of the education system in Britain' (2011, p.28). Callaghan's speech explicitly linked education with the economy and sustaining competitive advantage on a global scale. This approach within higher education continued into the following years, where there was a change in the conception of higher education (by government) from it being viewed as a public good to its purpose being to benefit the economy on a national and global

level. These changes in conception can be seen in Government Green Papers such as *The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s* (DES, 1985) and *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge* (DES, 1987) which galvanised the link between education and the economy, therefore producing an instrumental ideology.

With regards to my thesis and the concept of belonging, Callaghan's vision, in a similar vein to the Robbins Report, provided the means for universities to widen the access they had to the general population who would, in turn, become culturally their own subjects, supported by government policy. The notion of 'belonging' within this context is interesting, as the changes to government policy on higher education represent the starting point for how it is understood today. Callaghan's vision promotes a sense of economic prosperity being explicitly linked to more of the population belonging within the higher education environment. It therefore becomes functionally important for universities to support their students into a position where they feel that they do belong, in order to deliver government policy and maintain this ideology.

In the following years, participation rates within higher education continued to grow, and in the 1990s the Labour Party announced that they wanted to see participation rates reach 50 per cent of young people. This 'massification' of higher education brought with it the introduction of tuition fees, whereby 'the crucial determining factor was the overall funding crisis brought about by the transition to a mass higher education system' (Rees & Stroud, 2001, p.77), as the higher education system could not financially sustain the growth in student numbers. Marginson (1997, p.122) believes this change would not have been possible unless 'the old discourse of rights to education had been partly displaced by the attractions of choice-making individuality'. This change reflected the moral drift, which was already well established in other parts of society, to the neo-liberal which is defined by Mudge (2008, p.706) as 'the superiority of individualized, market-based competition over other modes of organization', which is the environment we continue to operate in today. Increasing tuition fees has reinforced notions of choice and competition within higher education.

Another major theme in higher education in the 1990s was the drive to widen access to higher education to particular groups in society, namely those who were

underrepresented in the student population. Success in this aim has been seen in the participation rates of women, ethnic minority and working class students (Rees and Stroud, 2001). However, a recent report by the Office for Fair Access states that although there have been improvements in the participation rates in higher education within the widening access groups, 'the most advantaged 20 per cent of young people were still 2.5 times more likely to go to higher education (overall) than the most disadvantaged 40 per cent' (Office for Fair Access Annual Report and Accounts 2013-14, p.31), suggesting that the government have not been wholly successful in achieving their aims.

The arguably limited success in improving participation rates in higher education suggests that the process of encouraging a mass population to belong to an institution has been only partially achieved because higher education is not as tolerant to a heterogeneous group of students as OFFA had hoped it would be. This further suggests that the argument I have traced through this section: that encouraging mass access to higher education, rather than preserving it for the elite, has resulted in higher education adopting practices which aim to encourage individuals to 'belong'. This is perhaps an inevitable situation and one which enables the survival of universities.

### **3.2.1 The neo-liberal era**

The trend towards a neo-liberal, individualistic view of higher education is noticeable in the emergence of the new nomenclature associated with higher education, mobilising terms such as 'student voice' and 'student experience' which point to the freedoms of choice making individuals. The definition of neo-liberalism provided by Harvey (2005, p.2) is 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, free trade'. Neo-liberalism places market exchange at the centre of human action. Its principles state that if individuals have full information they are able to make rational decisions within the market place about the best course of action for them, this is realised through the notion of competition within the market. The state's role in this is to ensure that the market is able to function effectively.

This is clearly evident in higher education presently and Staddon and Standish (2012, p.632) in particular note that 'key policy documents over the past fifteen years reveal the emerging prominence of student experience and its increasing political purchase' which fits with the changing view of students being perceived primarily as consumer rather than learner (although this notion is debated in the literature, see for example Barnett, 2011), and the notion of choice in the higher education market place. This view of higher education has led to increased importance being assigned to the National Student Survey, along with other league table measures.

The continued market momentum can be seen in the 2011 Government White Paper 'Putting Students at the Heart of the System' which focussed on increasing competitiveness between universities, where 'strengthening the quality assurance systems that institutions use to maintain quality and academic standards' (p.36) is advocated. This focus on competition at government policy level leads some to believe that the original purpose of higher education has been lost at the expense of an increasingly consumerist motivation, highlighted by Vraști (2011, para.5) as a concern that 'we might have sold out our dreams for dignity and self-mastery to a consumerist and callous arrangement'. This neo-liberal turn within higher education has meant that the relationships between government, the institution and the student are in a state of flux, where there is no original purpose of higher education to refer back to.

This situation echoes Baudrillard's (1983) theory of simulacra and simulacrum. For Baudrillard, a consumerist society has led to 'things' being primarily about consumption and signification, rather than about their original purpose or utility. The massification of higher education and the neo-liberal move to a competitive marketplace has led to media intrusion into the realm of higher education (through, for example, publicity materials and media interest in government policy) and this in turn has led to new and competing representations of higher education.

Using Baudrillard's theory, I can argue that we are now at a point where higher education is a simulation and

'There is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality – a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity. Escalation of the true, of lived

experience, resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared' (Baudrillard, 1983, p.7).

The proliferation of the use of league tables, national surveys, and the intrusion of media interest in this area could be viewed as an attempt to maintain a purpose for higher education in a time when its original purpose and meaning has been lost. In terms of belonging, this poses a question about what this phenomenon might mean in this context – whether, using Baudrillard's terminology, the hyper-real simulation of a university and the notion of student which has been represented through the mass media, has led to an inconsistent experience of 'belonging' within the student body, which is no longer grounded in reality, or whether by using a Lacanian lens we can argue that higher education's reliance on external league tables is Lacanian paranoia in action – looking to the external Other for confirmation of its coherent existence. Understanding how belonging and community is experienced by students in this context will be explored with my research participants in the research phase of this thesis.

Despite the prolific use of survey results and league tables, there are many criticisms against the utility of these tools. Bowden (2000, p.52) states that 'the main criticisms levelled at university league tables to date have been that they are unreliable, that they do not measure what they claim to measure, and that they have no statistical validity'. These comments relate to the lack of a consistent idea on which measures a university should be rated against and the methodology which is used to create the league tables, as this tends to change year on year and subsequently make it difficult to provide any comparison between universities (Staddon and Standish, 2012). This echoes Baudrillard's notions of simulacra and the hyper-real, as the inability to identify a consistent measure for higher education suggests that our beliefs in an original purpose and meaning for higher education, erroneous beliefs at that, have led to the pursuit of an agenda which has resulted in an over reliance on measures and have led to a simulation of higher education which is merely a simulacrum, thus rendering all forms of measure futile. This I would argue creates a problem for 'belonging', as it is difficult to comprehend how one experiences a sense of belonging at a time when higher education is in a state of flux, or indeed how a sense of belonging is signified.

This shift, it is argued, has led to an instrumental approach within higher education, where the focus is less on self-mastery, but instead on achieving league table status and meeting the requirements of the monitoring bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). This has led to fewer opportunities for academic staff to bring creativity into their teaching, due to the increasing demands for standardisation and an increased focus on 'passing the test' rather than an engagement with critical thinking. This is summarised by Evans as a state in which, 'regulation of the kind now practised in English universities produces fear, and little else. The various regulatory practices encourage mutual surveillance and informal discipline; what is never achieved through these practices is innovation, creativity or intellectual engagement' (2004, p.63). It represents yet another example of the purported original meaning of higher education being replaced by meaningless signifiers which serve a neo-liberal construct of higher education.

Furthermore, the reported increases in the workload of academic staff, with the pressures of teaching and research are reflected in a recent research study by Shin and Jung (2014) which found that academics in the UK are relatively less satisfied and experience higher levels of stress when compared with academics in other countries. This situation is attributed to a lack of job security and managerial reforms which aim to produce a culture of competition and performance based management which evaluates faculty performance against pre-determined indicators. Furedi (2004) notes that the extent of bureaucratic control within universities 'distracts teachers from cultivating their relationship with students and parents' and has put the student / lecturer relationship into one of 'silent conflict of interest between two parties who have every reason to act in a calculating way towards one another' (p.9).

This reported increase in workload, stress and reduced job satisfaction are likely to have impacted on the ability of academic staff to develop their relationships with students in such a way that engenders a sense of belonging for students and this, in turn, has created a space for student support services to fill.

The changing focus in higher education to one of increased managerialism, the recruitment of an increasingly heterogeneous student population and the marketplace environment which is attempting to place the student as a customer of higher education, explain to some extent why the notion of belonging and its

perceived importance has appeared on the agenda within universities as a phenomenon which there is benefit in managing. All of these factors have combined to create the belief that we, as a University, should be doing something to ensure a sense of belonging in our students. This is in line with an explicit concern over the qualitative experience of our students - their 'student experience', which has drawn the emotional into what was previously a focus on the intellectual. The student experience, which includes the emotional, is now parcelled up as part of the product that students are purchasing, partly driven through the significations of the media, along with their academic development. The next section of this chapter provides a lens through which to understand the place of student support within the university setting.

### **3.3 Zizek, higher education and student support**

Before moving to a consideration of student support services in higher education, I will consider the work of Zizek in the context of this thesis. The above section details the current neo-liberal context of higher education. As discussed, the neo-liberal valorises the free market and competition. When a student is considering which university to attend, and paying their tuition fees and completing their enrolment, they are entering into a deferred promise of fulfilment – the achievement of their degree and anticipation of a graduate level job and a better quality of life. This is the ideological fantasy of neo-liberalism. The notion of creating a 'sense of a belonging' within students, and seeing this as a process that we should both be aware of and indeed be managing, is symptomatic of the neo-liberal push that all should be benefiting from higher education, and any losses (through withdrawal from the system) are understood as anomalies / exceptions to what should be happening.

Within the hyper reality of higher education, there is an inherent difficulty with the idea of pastoral support services for students – those services which exist to support students who may feel suicidal, have been sexually assaulted, or feel that they do not 'fit in'. Using the ideas of Zizek from his work *Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), there is a sense that pastoral support can be constructed as something which is hidden – the truth that it has to exist to deal with student problems is hidden in order to produce and enable the façade that the university experience is the dream that is sold at Open Days. Using Zizek, I can say that the ideal university experience presented to students is, paradoxically at the same time, a place where something

bad may happen, somewhere the student may want to leave, and as far as this thesis is concerned, somewhere that a student may feel that they do not belong. This 'hidden' possibility of a negative student experience is represented through the work of student support services, where particular initiatives are targeted at students to help them feel a sense of belonging and encourage them to stay when they may want to leave (amongst other responsibilities).

Zizek talks of the 'ideological fantasy' which he explains as:

'They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality' (1989, p.30).

Thus, we know that student life can be fraught with difficulty and that it is not the most appropriate option for everyone, but in the current neo-liberal marketplace we continue to promote the idea that it is the best choice for all and that it will reap rewards which we cannot guarantee. As stated by Dean:

'neoliberal ideology does not provide symbolic identities - that is sites from which we can see ourselves. In their place, it offers opportunities for new ways for me to imagine myself, a variety of lifestyles with which I can experiment' (2008, p.61).

It promotes the idea used by higher education in our marketing that the student experience is something to aspire to, both as an experience and as the achievement of a degree, and ultimately the deferred promise of the fulfilment of one's potential in the career market.

Our complicity in creating and upholding this illusion enables the university to maintain its image as a beneficial place to be for students. This then has an impact on belonging – because the act of trying to create a sense of belonging, in a covert way, often becomes the responsibility of student support and increasingly the responsibility of academic departments too (see Thomas, 2012). The aim of the university is not to create a sense of belonging in its students, but by trying to manage and create a sense of belonging we are ensuring the economic viability of



the institution and upholding the belief that university is a good thing for students, in turn supporting the neo-liberal ideology of the current era.

A desire to conceal the other possible (negative) experiences of university is also encountered when there has been the suggestion that we (student support services) introduce the notion to students that they may feel isolated at university or struggle with a sense of belonging before they actually start, with a view to managing their expectations and signposting them to services who will be able to help. Again, this course of action would detract from the illusion we are trying to uphold as it goes against the image the Marketing teams want to present. This situation highlights the internal conflict experienced within the university environment with regard to providing a realistic understanding of student life against a version of student life which is more appealing and stands out against its competitors. The next section of this chapter discusses the professional area of student support services and its relationship with the student body.

### **3.4 Student support services and the changing understanding of student agency**

Student support services are widely understood to have a remit for supporting the student experience and arguably promoting a sense of belonging is now understood to be part of this. As part of a recent discussion about the notion of student as consumer, the Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education (AMOSSHE) put forward the idea that, 'Student Services play a critical role in personalising the student experience(s) and in ensuring that HE is not about delivering products or transactions which can be quantified in a pure sense' (AMOSSHE, 2013a, p.2). This understanding of student support services is characterised as one of the 'unquantifiable' aspects of higher education, a softer more qualitative aspect of the student experience. An example to illustrate this would be that many student support services will run peer mentoring schemes which have the aim of increasing social networks for students, helping the student settle in and reducing feelings of isolation in the student population. The notion of 'personalising' the student experience also fits with a neo-liberal and individualist focus.

Historically, pastoral support was located within the academic department through the provision of a personal tutor system (Earwaker, 1992). However, support

services in the current day are usually centralised and their approaches and composition vary. Tait (2004, p.288) has identified the following areas as being representative of the tradition of the provision of support:

- 'The Judaeo-Christian tradition of pastoral care, drawing on the metaphor of the shepherd caring for the flock, especially the weak;
- The social democratic tradition of caring for the vulnerable who are pushed aside in capitalist society;
- The patrician tradition of care for disadvantaged social inferiors'.

Along with the traditions above, Tait adds a fourth, which he describes as 'independent activity of community self-help' (ibid., p.288) which is characterised through the activities of peer support. Each of the models described above locates the agency of the person who is the recipient of the pastoral support differently, dependent upon how the power relationship between the person and the organisation is perceived. These approaches (excluding the notion of community self-help) place the support service in a position of power over the student.

The concept of pastoral care places the student body as a whole in need of guidance and care from the institution and suggests that the institution is, in some sense, a moral guide for the student. The social democratic and patrician traditions construct those as requiring support as being diminished in some way and in need of intervention in order to survive. This necessarily 'others' these students from the rest of the student population. In my own institution I would argue that our approach encompasses all of these traditions to some extent, with a move in more recent years to an approach which is described, by O'Rourke (1999, p.100) as 'canaries in the mine', whereby the problems experienced by an individual (described by O'Rourke as the death of the canary in the mine) are taken to be an indicator of problems which could be experienced by a wider population of people. Interventions are, therefore, usually open to all.

The notion of community self-help has gathered pace in recent years and research has shown that significant value is placed on social support by students (Jacklin & Robinson, 2007). Universities have tried to manage this aspect by developing and running their own peer mentoring schemes or by partnering with charities and external organisations to run peer support groups (for example with Re-Think Mental

Health or Student Minds) but this still construes the student as having a problem, which is that students do not conform to a profile which functionally makes them 'one of the (right) crowd'. My own acknowledgement of the limitations of our practices as student support services has influenced my approach to this thesis – a decision to interview students about their experiences of belonging with a view to understanding the resources they might deploy as individuals in creating a sense of belonging outside of student support interventions.

As explained in the section above, current day student support services are operating in a market environment where there is the associated drive to provide high quality services which meet students' needs (and wants). Arguably marketization has brought with it the pressure that student support services need to provide the 'best' student experience in order to meet the demands of the market. Whereas lecturers are principally concerned that the marketplace is going to force them into curbing the critical and challenging nature of their programmes, instead pressuring them into providing only positive feedback in order to maintain 'student satisfaction' (Furedi, 2004), student support professionals are concerned that they are being expected to do too much in their support of students (AMOSSHE, 2013b). This position once again echoes Baudrillard's notion of simulacra and simulation as previously described: that is, higher education has succumbed to a position where its original function has been displaced by signifiers which are focused on the consumerist agenda of ensuring satisfaction.

This situation positions the student's agency in a problematic place, as it suggests that s/he does not have the capacity for self-actualisation and resilience without some sort of intervention being made. This results in a sense of collective helplessness which positions students as being in need of support in order to appreciate fully the student experience available to them. This in effect opens up the realm of the private to the public, a 'state' intervention of the university in which it becomes a moral requirement to provide interventions which 'support' the student to stay and access higher education. The concern over student retention and subsequently concern over the notion that a sense of belonging is key to retention is in the area which 'is largely framed in terms of "problems" to be solved' (Clegg, Bradley & Smith, 2007, p.101). This perpetuates the belief that interventions are needed. Indeed, 'a diminished sense of human potential denies the intellectual and

privileges the emotional' (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009, p.xi), which is a surprising way to construct the student within higher education, ostensibly a place where you would expect the intellectual to be privileged.

This approach to student support is located within a therapeutic discourse, which Hayes (2004, p.181) defines as being rooted in the belief that 'we are all emotionally vulnerable'. The aim of this approach is 'a vision of the "therapeutic university" – an institution that makes students feel safe and secure, and does not challenge them at all' (ibid., p.184). For Hayes, the therapeutic approach within education is moving students and academics away from the stimulating environment of academic challenge and criticism and instead there is an 'overriding concern with their own and their pupils' or students' feelings' (ibid., p.184). I argue that our concern over developing a sense of belonging and community between students and the university is, in part, a result of this therapeutic discourse.

A sense of belonging, according to the literature review, is based on a physiological need, as well as a psychological one. It is arguably a naturally occurring 'wish' or 'hope' for all students who are moving away from home to university that they will, eventually, feel a sense of belonging within their new environment. However, now that a 'sense of belonging' has become something that we, as universities, are trying to manage, it has almost become pathologised, particularly where we perceive that those who feel that they do not belong may withdraw from university, when arguably this is not a problem just a phenomenon which will naturally occur for some and should be expected. It has become pathologised in the sense that we need to treat it; for example, through the provision of buddying schemes, peer mentoring or through the provision of 'alternative social activities'.

From my own professional point of view, the idea that people may not be able to cope with the transition to higher education is embraced by student support services, which provide interventions to counteract this and improve resilience within the student body. On this reading, the university is upholding the notion of a student being a vulnerable subject who is susceptible to the interventions provided by support services.

Higher education's current interest in a 'sense of belonging' is typical of practices which assume a notion of the self which either does or does not fit into the higher

education environment; as the student population has become more heterogeneous the journey towards a position where we want to actively manage their 'sense of belonging' has been an inevitable consequence. This construction of the student as a self which is vulnerable within the university is enabled through the discourse of a therapeutic culture.

Interestingly however, the market based environment that we are in currently, positions the student as a consumer or customer of the services that we offer to them. In this respect, agency is understood to be firmly located within the student. This mirrors the Cartesian approach, whereby the culture within higher education

'has traditionally been constructed as the paradigmatic site of pure rationality devoted to the dispassionate and objective search for truth, an emotion-free zone, reflecting the dominance of Cartesian dualism with its rational / emotional, mind / body, public / private, masculine / feminine split' (Leathwood & Hey, 2009, p.429).

However, this approach does not fit with the therapeutic culture described above. There is a disconnect between the idea of a choice making and autonomous (adult) consumer, who acts in a rational manner, who is self-directed and self-motivated, and the idea of a student who lacks the emotional resilience required to enable them to pursue academic challenge and the emotional resources and wherewithal to manage their non-academic time in a fulfilling way.

The disconnect between these two constructions of the student explains the 'need' for student support services but also explains the current concern with the boundaries of the role of student support services. For example, when working in an academic environment which is intellectually challenging, at what point did we shift to an interventionist approach where notions such as 'belonging' and 'community' became our concern? Although this debate is beyond the scope of this thesis, I hope that this section has provided an overview which provides a basis for understanding the concern of support services over a sense of belonging.

### **3.5 Summary**

This thesis aims to shed light on the lived experience of belonging within the undergraduate residential student body, with the expectation of providing an

understanding for higher education providers which will enable them to determine whether there is a need for proactive interventions in this area, and, if so, how this need might be met. The approach that I am taking with my thesis locates agency back with the student as an individual, not as a consumer, customer or partner in higher education. The idea that the culture we live in now uses a therapeutic lens for viewing and managing society explains how a thesis with the aim of providing a phenomenological (a methodology heavily utilised within counselling / therapist professions) understanding of belonging within residential university students has come to be. Indeed, as Ecclestone states, in a therapeutic culture, 'vague ideas about "the co-production of the learning experience", "self-enhancement" and "self-realisation" encourage institutions to elicit more authentic expressions of "needs" and to respond to people's feelings about their experiences' (2007, p.463).

The students that are the focus of my thesis, those who are broadly categorised as traditional undergraduate students due to their residential status, have been schooled through the period when a therapeutic education has arguably been at its peak. Therefore it is no surprise that current research into student retention is turning towards the emotional (for example belonging and resilience) as an important factor for the university to consider. Moreover, it is a somewhat natural progression if success in a therapy culture is emphasised through the emotional.

## **Chapter 4: Engaging with Practitioner Research**

### **4.1 Introduction**

As outlined in the earlier chapters of this thesis, I am a student support practitioner, problematizing through this research thesis the understanding of 'belonging' and 'community' as experienced by undergraduate residential students. This chapter outlines the methodological approach undertaken throughout this study, along with a review of the ethical implications involved in this type of research.

#### **4.1.2 Research question**

The questions I hope to provide answers to are as follows:

How do undergraduate residential students understand their experiences of 'belonging'?

How do undergraduate residential students understand the notion of community within the University environment?

I have chosen to position this research within a poststructuralist framework, which is a position concerned with the 'relationship between human beings, the world, and the practice of making and reproducing meanings' (Belsey, p.5, 2002). It is characterised as having a 'reluctance to ground discourse in any theory with metaphysical origins, suspicion of the Enlightenment project, scepticism about scientific approaches and a view of meaning as being unstable and plural' (Farrell, 2012, p.129). Poststructuralism, with its emphasis on providing a counter explanation to our commonly held beliefs on the 'way things are' in the world resonates with my own position in my research topic. I feel that universities' approaches in promoting a sense of belonging within undergraduate students should be problematized, and poststructuralism provides me with the ability to do this as it provides a framework whereby claims to knowledge can be disrupted.

When identifying an appropriate methodology for this research, an ethnographic approach was initially considered because

'It is a written representation of a culture that not only describes the practices of the culture but also analyzes the functions and purposes of those events, describes the conditions under which particular behaviors or practices occur,

and suggests some greater significance and deeper understanding of the culture' (VanderStoep & Johnston, 2009, p.204)

As a qualitative research methodology, it would have been suitable for my exploratory research questions. However, I rejected this approach due to my wish to study the very specific experience of the phenomenon of belonging; this desire fitted into a phenomenological methodology. Whereas ethnography would have given me the opportunity to provide an understanding of the 'cultural' experiences of undergraduate residential students through an immersive fieldwork study of their experiences, phenomenology gives me the opportunity to adopt the phenomenological attitude, where 'the strength of this method lies in its ability to bring to life the richness of existence through description of what may appear at first sight to be ordinary, mundane living' (Finlay, 2011, p.26). The strength of this approach, as opposed to other approaches, is the ability to focus so specifically on an ordinary aspect of the participants' lives, in the hope and expectation that something extraordinary will be revealed. As a practitioner, undertaking practice based research, this element of phenomenology was very important to me, and I therefore aligned my research to phenomenology rather than ethnography.

Therefore, this research will be conducted using a phenomenological approach which fits with an exploratory research question (Robson, 2002). It aims to provide an understanding of how the notion of belonging is experienced by first year undergraduate students along with their understanding of a university community. A study which aims to closely examine people's experiences of life events and the meanings that they give to them is deemed appropriate for a phenomenological study (Becker, 1992). As a researcher practitioner, phenomenology is also an appropriate approach to take, as advocated by van Manen, 'phenomenology formatively informs, reforms, transforms, performs, and performs the relation between being and practice' (2007, p.26). Contextually therefore, this approach is an appropriate fit for my research study, both enabling me to study peoples' experiences and to relate them, through a poststructural lens, to my practice.

There is much debate in the literature over how phenomenology should be defined, despite the fact that its roots span back to the last century. Gadamer (1976) traces its history to Husserl and regards it as a philosophical movement which moved from



transcendental phenomenology, to existential phenomenology through Heidegger; furthermore the use of phenomenology can be found in a wide variety of disciplines including philosophy, psychology, psychotherapy, medicine and more (van Manen, 1990). The phenomenological movement has a varied history and as such it is not possible to find a single agreed definition for it. However, Spiegelberg (1982, p.680) in providing an historical overview of phenomenology, states that 'the common concern is that of giving the phenomena a fuller and fairer hearing than traditional empiricism has accorded them'. Spiegelberg argues that this occurs through the researcher patiently, 'opening his eyes', 'keeping them open', 'not getting blinded', 'looking and listening' (ibid., p.682), a process which requires great patience and attention. This detailed look at the phenomenon should enable the researcher to identify the core elements of that phenomenon. However, in the case of my study, by using a poststructuralist framework I am rejecting the idea that it is possible to discover the pure 'essence' of a phenomenon; rather I will be providing an understanding which is mediated through the experiences of the participants and analysed through a poststructural lens.

An interpretive epistemology has been chosen for this study as it fits with the phenomenological approach. According to Bryman (2008, p.15), the interpretive framework is one which is 'concerned with the empathic understanding of human action rather than with the forces that are deemed to act on it'. Spiegelberg asserts that a search for truth as such is not the goal of phenomenology, rather 'all that matters is that his experience presented him with the phenomenon of doubt or of love, which is to be studied for its own sake, regardless of the specific case and the subjectivity or objectivity of the observation that brought the phenomenon before him' (ibid.,p.688). This fits with the interpretive epistemology as the pursuit of a single truth is not its goal, rather it allows for different meanings attributed by the different experiencing individuals, which in turn corresponds with the poststructuralist perspective.

Judgements about research undertaken in this format have to be based on the understanding that 'phenomenological inquiry-writing is based on the idea that no text is ever perfect, no interpretation is ever complete, no explication of meaning is ever final, no insight is beyond challenge' (van Manen, 2011, para.5). This always incomplete interpretation of data is a common feature of qualitative research,

however phenomenological research aims to be judged by its ability to describe a phenomenon in such a way that it resonates with others who have had a similar experience. In my case, this would be others who have had the experience of being undergraduate residential students themselves.

Seamon states that

'Ultimately, the most significant test of trustworthiness for any phenomenological study is its relative power to draw the reader into the researcher's discoveries, allowing the reader to see his or her own world or the worlds of others in a new, deeper way. The best phenomenological work breaks people free from their usual recognitions and moves them along new paths of understanding' (2000, section 5, para.18)

In my situation, I will be sharing my research findings with student support colleagues in the hope that they are able to gain a new or richer perspective on how belonging is experienced by residential students.

Ontologically, phenomenology does not deny the existence of an external world; however its task lies in understanding the meaning which is given to this world by the individual. Phenomenology does not pre-suppose that individuals can be studied in complete isolation; there is an understanding that they are inseparable from their environment. In the context of my research this fits as I am looking at the notion of belonging as understood by my first year residential undergraduate participants, along with their understanding of community, which will be analysed with particular reference to Nancy's theory which conceptualises community as a sharing of the self. I accept that a phenomenological approach means that an experiencing body exists, which is able to process phenomena and attribute meanings to it, and from a poststructural perspective I also accept that there will be multiple meanings and understandings attributed to the phenomena I am investigating. As my interest lies in the residential student experience, recognising that this is a qualitatively situated experience in a particular place, I feel that a phenomenological perspective will be the most appropriate approach for this study. Becker explains that phenomenology stipulates that 'meaning is created in the back-and-forth movement, the dialectic, between self and object or self and other. It does not reside in the object, in the self or in the other' (Becker, 1992, p.19). This perspective is hermeneutical in nature,

where the dialectical movement is located in a social, cultural and historical context; in the case of my research this context is the University. People are inherently part of their context, they are inseparable from it. For the purpose of this thesis I am treating belonging and the notion of community as an experience, which joins self / other relationally in the University context. The relationship between self and other is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

By focusing on what is said by research participants during their interviews, I can not only provide a phenomenological understanding of their experiences of belonging, but also provide a poststructuralist understanding of how language has mediated students' experiences of belonging. This approach does not subscribe to the belief that there is a truth to be discovered. Rather it positions itself in such a way that there can be only experiences which are mediated through signifiers and my analysis is therefore equally mediated through the permitted cultural signifiers I have at my disposal. There is no 'true' meaning within which an ultimate signifier resides; I can attempt only to provide an understanding by taking up a particular position within the cultural web of meanings of which I am part. Equally, I understand that the interview data can provide me with only partial information which is situated within the context and time and place within which it has been collected and analysed, rendering it culturally shaped and bound, thus highlighting the limitations of this methodological approach.

Following a thematic analysis, the research data will be analysed using aspects of Jacques Lacan's theoretical perspective, which fits with my chosen methodological framework. A psychoanalytical lens can be combined with a phenomenological approach because it does not seek to subscribe to objective truth. Instead it subscribes to the belief that subjectivity lies outside of the subject and is accumulated by the subject. This belief means that the subject is an effect of culture, which gives credence to the poststructuralist notion that there are multiple meanings and by virtue of this, inconsistencies in our understandings of the world. Meanings are understood with reference to an Other which lies outside of the subject (this is discussed with reference to Lacan in the Discussion chapter). Karlsson (2010) has identified seven different elements which connect phenomenology and psychoanalysis, as follows:

- Interest in the subjective;
- The concepts of intentionality and meaning;
- Interest in the latent;
- The significance of reflection;
- The value of openness;
- The break with the 'common-sense attitude';
- Responsibility as an ethical principle.

Each of these elements is apparent in both phenomenology and psychoanalysis, albeit with a slightly different emphasis in each case. For example, when considering 'interest in the subjective', phenomenology is concerned with the individual's experience of a phenomenon, and similarly psychoanalysis is interested in the subjective experiencing of the individual, but with a focus on the unconscious.

Csordas (2012) puts together a compelling argument for a shared understanding between phenomenology and psychoanalysis, stating that they are both 'thoroughgoing, comprehensive, and complementary accounts of subjectivity' (p.69) and are therefore a worthy partnership within research. Throop (2012) in a similar exploration of the relationship between psychoanalysis and phenomenology, whilst recognising that there are many different approaches to psychoanalysis within the discipline, states that

'Both traditions assume that, while there are necessary limits to self-knowledge and to one's knowledge of others, an individual comes to know others through self-experience, and comes to know their own selfhood through the experience of others' (p.78)

Both approaches can offer a rich perspective on the experience of a phenomenon when used in tandem, complementing and yet offering something additional to the other. Throop observes that 'both traditions look to language as indicating the existence of something that is necessarily unfolded in, and yet somehow other than language, whether that otherness is understood in terms of experiences, images,

mental processes, desires, sensations, or instincts.' (2012, p.78). Throop's observation aligns with the approach I have taken to the methodology for this thesis and with the approach I have taken to data analysis, the results of which are discussed in the next chapter.

Lacanian psychoanalysis is traditionally based on a case study method – a highly subjective interaction between the psychoanalyst and his / her client.

Epistemologically this leads to a specific outcome which is highly individualistic. My intention is to use Lacan's concepts of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real as an additional layer to the thematic analysis which follows participant interviews. This will enable me to develop an over-arching understanding of the experience of belonging and community, which draws on the data from all of the participant interviews, rather than a deep psychoanalytical understanding of a single case.

Psychoanalytic theory is frequently used by scholars outside of the clinic. A current example of this can be viewed through the work of Kelly Oliver (see for example 'Colonization of Psychic Space', 2004) who utilises psychoanalysis in her commentary on a wide range of socio-political issues, and is a strong illustration of the value and impact a psychoanalytical approach can have on a range of disciplines. Ziarek (2011) states that Oliver's 'interdisciplinary work not only brings together philosophical knowledge and the cultural analysis of urgent ethical and political issues...but also provides an alternative understanding of transformative praxis language, and ethics' (p.30). Similarly, Todd McGowan makes great use of psychoanalytic theory in the broad range of his work, again covering a breadth of social and political analysis, and with particular reference to a Lacanian interpretation of film (for example McGowan 2003; McGowan 2007) where he provides rich interpretations of film and the film experience from a psychoanalytical, and Lacanian, perspective. These examples demonstrate that a precedent has been set for the benefits of taking psychoanalytical interpretation outside of the clinic.

From a methodological perspective, Stephen Frosh (2010) talks of the important difference between psychoanalysis, which is a very specific interaction that takes place in the clinic between the analyst and analysand, and the use of psychoanalytic ideas in other, non-clinical, contexts. He states

'perhaps the way in which psychoanalysis embodies an encounter provides a model for understanding and promoting all occasions on which 'something happens', so long as one recognises the possible consequences of the leap being made from the clinic to its outside' (p.4).

This important recognition of transferring the process of psychoanalytic interpretation from the clinic to the outside is highlighted by Thomas (2007) who writes of the impact of using psychoanalysis in qualitative methodology within the sphere of geography, specifically subjectivity and social identification and the process of using interviews. She highlights the ethical tensions involved in using human subjects in research that is using psychoanalysis as an interpretive framework, concluding that the role of the scholar in utilising psychoanalysis as a framework is not to deviate into the realm of expert psychoanalyst, especially due to the brief encounter between researcher and research subject. This means that the limitation of using psychoanalytic theory within a non-clinical setting is that 'the utility of psychoanalysis for social science is primarily to provide frameworks to conceptualize narratives...rather than to psychoanalyze the individuals who utter them' (Thomas, 2007, p.543). In this research I will be using psychoanalytic theory in this way, as a framework to understand the data gained from participant interviews.

Whilst I have introduced my intention to utilise aspects of Lacan's theory within this chapter, his work is not substantially discussed until Chapter Five. This is a reflection of the way in which my thesis unfolded.

The possibility of using Lacan's psychoanalytic theory as a lens through which to explain my data was first introduced in early discussions with my supervisors, during the preliminary data analysis phase. These early discussions piqued my interest, and I left our meetings intrigued by the prospect of what a Lacanian perspective on my data could offer. A closer reading of Lacan's work led to a deeper engagement with it during the formal data analysis stages, and his work is heavily referenced throughout Chapter Five as I discuss my findings. As a result of this, elements of Lacan's psychoanalytic theory are introduced in the first section of Chapter Five, and then interwoven throughout the discussion and analysis of the participant interviews, rather than being introduced in a more substantive way earlier in the thesis.

I will include a phenomenological description of the experience of belonging and community in the final chapter of this thesis, which will be a composite pastiche of the voices from this study. My success in producing a description which resonates with the experiences of others is one of the criteria upon which I would expect this research to be judged.

My own personal interest in the research area brings out the need for me to define whether I am going to choose to align my research with the school of phenomenology which has a foundation in Husserl or Heidegger's philosophy. Husserl's phenomenology is often referred to as descriptive, whereas Heidegger's is referred to as hermeneutic (Dowling, 2004). The approach advocated by Husserl would require me to 'bracket' my own preconceptions on the phenomena I wish to study, where 'pre-understandings that are acknowledged and validated are less apt to be imposed upon research participants' (Becker, 1992, p.38). This is an attempt to provide an objective view on the phenomena.

Heidegger's approach to phenomenology, later developed by Gadamer, 'believed that hermeneutics was a method of interpretation that directs the investigator to Being (presence in the world)' (Dowling, 2004, p.35). Gadamer stated that 'the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience' (1976, p.9) and therefore understanding in the present is necessarily rooted within our own prejudices. Thus, one could never hope to achieve the critical distance of pure objectivity. This also means that understanding is itself a fluid process which is rooted in its own historicity and requires the researcher to use their imagination in their engagement with their subject matter and 'the hermeneutic process becomes a dialogical method whereby the horizon of the interpreter and the phenomenon being studied are combined together' (Dowling, 2005, p.134). Based on these definitions of the two approaches I have decided to use the approach of hermeneutic phenomenology as I see myself as part of the process (due to my role as practitioner and my own undergraduate experiences) rather than being able to secure a critical distance from it.

One of the important facets of a phenomenological approach is the appreciation of the part 'time' has to play in the understandings which are presented by the research

participants. A phenomenological study is interested in the meanings attributed to a phenomenon in the present. My decision to look at this phenomena from the perspective of a current first year student recognises the importance of the 'present' understanding of the phenomena, which I hope will be of value to me and other practitioners who work with this student group. The approach to phenomenology advocated by Heidegger (2011) is characterised by the belief that the concept of *dasein*, all three time frames (past, present and future), are acting upon an individual at any given moment, and a person is therefore projecting their consciousness onto an external world. I have therefore chosen to use semi-structured interviews as my data collection method, to allow my participants to bring into their narratives any relevant past, present or future meanings. Qualitative approaches such as semi structured interviews are used in research where the focus seeks to explore and understand the participants' experiences in relation to the phenomenon (Blaikie, 2000).

#### **4.2 Research design**

For this research I recruited nine students with whom I undertook semi-structured interviews. My aim in undertaking semi-structured interviews was to enable me to 'extract the common components from unique events and illuminate the essential themes of unique experiences' (Becker, 1992, p.23). For the phenomenologist, the individual's own (but always incomplete) understanding of their experiences is essential to the research methodology. The interviews took between forty minutes and one hour to complete and all participants were informed that I may wish to invite them to a second follow-up interview, as the interview process is only complete once 'researcher and researchee feel that descriptions have been thorough and inclusive' (Becker, 1992, p.41). However, it transpired that I did not need to request a follow-up interview with any of the participants.

Participants who reside in University accommodation were invited to take part in the study. My initial thoughts had been to send an email to all residential students, asking for an expression of interest in participating in the study, but discussions with my supervisors suggested that this would be unlikely to yield many responses and that attending a pre-arranged Hall Meeting in each of the residences may be more successful as it would give me the opportunity to explain more about the study which could result in more interest. However, this approach was also discarded as



discussions with the residential tutors revealed that there were no more Hall Meetings planned for the rest of the academic year. To assist me they offered to post a message to each of the Halls' Facebook pages on my behalf, which was very brief in nature, and participants were invited to contact me directly, via email, if they wanted further information about the study. This resulted in an almost immediate response from the participants who are represented in this study. When the students contacted me I emailed the Participant Information Sheet to them and they responded to ask more questions or confirm their participation if they wished to. Therefore participant recruitment was a combination of purposive and convenience sampling methods. Due to time constraints and ease of access, all participants were based at the campus where I work (convenience) and all were residential students (purposive).

The main disadvantage of convenience sampling is 'that it is impossible to generalize the findings, because we do not know of what population this sample is representative' (Bryman, 2008, p.183); however this did not pose an issue to me. My interest is in understanding the unique experiences of the residential students, rather than identifying a scientifically representative understanding of the experience which stretches beyond the borders of my own campus. I am interested in the students as individuals. Thus, I undertook nine semi-structured interviews between May and June 2014. Within the sample, all students were full-time and ethnically diverse. The age ranges were from eighteen to twenty, with the majority of participants being eighteen / nineteen years of age. Eight of the nine interviewees had come to University directly from school. The interview questions focused on 'memories of events that had been lived through rather than thoughts about the phenomenon' (Becker, 1992, p.38) and were open-ended. I had pre-prepared questions which were intended to evoke memories, such as 'What contexts or situations have influenced your experiences of "belonging"?' I then developed further questions as the interview progressed, which enabled me to remain present and engaged in the interview process.

My professional experience as a student support practitioner gave me the confidence that my role as an interviewer within the context of this research would be effective. I have spent ten years working with students in a one to one capacity, listening to them, synthesizing the information they have given me, reflecting it back

to them with the aim of enabling them to resolve their problems, which has developed my listening and interpersonal skills. I am, and continue to be, genuinely interested in their life stories and experiences and I believe that this has enabled me to gather rich and detailed descriptions from the participants.

I sought permission from each of the participants to audiotape the interviews which I then transcribed verbatim to enable me to capture each interviewee's account of their experiences. Although this is a time consuming process, it enabled me to get closer to the data which assisted in the thematic data analysis. I chose to analyse the data without the use of a computer software package as I felt that the intervention of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) into the analytical process would create a distance between my participants and myself as researcher. Furthermore, the psychoanalytical perspective that I intended to use on my data encourages an approach that is free from the barrier created by the computer, a barrier between the person and the psychoanalyst. In the same way that the clinician would not use a computer in their one to one appointments with their patients, I did not wish to create a distance with my participants by bringing another element into the analytical equation. A recent paper looking at the influence of CAQDAS on phenomenological research found that 'CAQDAS programs place one more thing between us and our lived experience, one more thing that must be overcome' (Goble, et al., 2012, para.39), which removes the researcher from the reflections and wanderings which are essential to the phenomenological research experience. Instead of utilising a software package, I segmented, coded and reassembled the data by hand to construct meaning, in the manner described by Boeije (2010), which allowed over-arching themes to be identified. This enabled me to maintain fluency throughout the data analysis phase.

### **4.3 Reflexive approach**

I have taken a reflexive approach to this research, defined as 'a self-conscious awareness of the effects that ... values, attitudes, perceptions, opinions, actions, feelings etc. are feeding into the situation being studied' (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, & Bell, 2011, p.357). This approach has been chosen because of my acknowledgement that in this research I am attempting to deliver a representation of the other – the undergraduate residential student. However, this representation is necessarily produced by myself as researcher and as such I am cognisant that my

interpretation of the data is necessarily filtered through my position within the University, my own student experience and my gender, social class, nationality and other diverse influencing factors. From a Lacanian perspective, my relationship to the Other also entails ‘the almost instantaneous character of identification, the finding of the self in the other’s response, the restless and endless processes of comparison, ranking, differentiating that this stimulates, along with the reflexive repair work on the self that follows ...’ (Roberts, 2005, p.638). I cannot avoid the fact that I am going to be representing the role of researcher and member of University staff and my participants will be representing the role of student at the University. We will all bring our subjectivities and self-consciously in-flux identities to the interview process.

From a Lacanian perspective, I, as a human subject, am incomplete. I construct my identity and indeed, during the two years I have spent reading, writing, and analysing I have changed and reconstructed my identity in light of the changing understandings I have had as a practitioner and fledgling member of the academic community. The person I was at the start of the project is not the same one who has finished this thesis. I am driven in my work through the fantasy I have of myself as practitioner and as researcher and this has necessarily drawn out tensions – some of which I will touch on in the section: Ethics. Brown and Jones (2001, p.8) assert that practitioner research from a poststructuralist perspective should be understood as ‘being targeted at producing a construction of self in relation to the professional / social context being faced’, and my work is certainly consistent with this axiom.

In this section I have used Altheide and Johnson’s (2013, p.393) notion of ‘ethnographic ethics’ as a framework for allowing the audience of this research to understand its limits in terms of validity and to understand my position within the research.

**1) The relationship between what is observed and the larger cultural, historical and organizational contexts within which the observations are made**

This area is described in detail in chapter three, but broadly this study takes place at a time of change in higher education where a neo-liberal approach is

governing the rhetoric of higher education, ideas of student as consumer are promoted and a therapeutic culture is running through many of our practices.

## **2) The relationship between the observer, the observed, and the setting**

As I am targeting undergraduate residential students, rather than any other particular demographic such as ethnicity, gender or age, the power relationship and issue of my ability to provide a representation of the experiences of belonging within this student group lie largely in the power relationship that comes from my being a University employee.

I had not had any prior contact with any of the students who volunteered to participate in this research, and did not have the ability to influence any area of their academic life. Our relationship was simply one of University employee (and postgraduate student) and undergraduate student.

In terms of the setting for the data collection, all participants were given the opportunity to meet with me at a place that they would find most comfortable. This led to a number of students asking to meet with me in one of the University's cafes over a coffee, with the remainder opting to meet with me in my own office, as they felt they would be more comfortable speaking with me on a one-to-one basis without being observed by others.

## **3) The issue of perspective, whether that of the observer or the members used to render an interpretation of the ethnographic data**

I am inevitably part of this research. I work in higher education and I work in a role which has a remit for supporting students. As identified in earlier chapters, I also have a work-related interest in the notion of belonging and community and the role of student support practitioners in supporting these phenomena within our student body. I have personal experience of being an undergraduate residential student, and although I reflect on my time at university with fondness, the notion of whether I belonged or not did not occur to me, at least explicitly, during my time at university. This could be related to the fact that I entered university as a white, middle class female, at the

traditional age of eighteen; so perhaps my belonging there existed prior to me crossing the university threshold.

However, I am careful to recognise that my own experience of being an undergraduate student cannot be assumed to be similar to the experiences of my research participants. I graduated more than a decade ago, in a different economic climate, at a time when tuition fees were vastly lower and social media did not exist – amongst other differences! My reflexive approach is therefore not an attempt to situate my own experiences with the experiences of my research participants. Rather, it is recognition that my own experience is not likely to provide me with a useful understanding of the experience of current students and that is one of the primary motivators for me undertaking this research project.

#### **4) The role of the reader in the final product**

The role of the reader is three-fold. Firstly, I hope that this research is able to provide an understanding for those who work in higher education of the notions of belonging and university community from the undergraduate, residential student perspective. The reader in this respect can use this understanding to inform their practice. Secondly, I hope to provide a phenomenological description of belonging and community which resonates with the experiences of my research participants; they have all expressed an interest in reading the research findings and capturing the essence of their experiences is very important to me.

Finally, I hope that the examiners of this thesis find themselves in the position to judge that this research is methodologically sound, and that the themes arising from the data analysis have been successfully woven into a Lacanian, poststructuralist perspective on the experience of belonging and community in undergraduate residential students and that even a partial utilisation of Lacan's psychoanalytic theories has added value to the understanding of students' experiences of belonging and community.

## **5) The issue of the representational style used by the author to render the description or interpretation**

The research design section describes how the interviews I undertook with the participants led to the development of the themes which are discussed in the Discussion chapter.

I hope this brief section has helped to situate me as researcher within this project and to enable the reader to gain an understanding of how my own viewpoint locates me within this project.

### **4.4 Ethical considerations**

As with all research involving human participants, it is important that consideration is given to the ethical implications of the study. The first area to consider is ensuring that all participants give informed consent to participate in the study which should be the key aim of all ethical research (Bell, 2010, p.46). As described in section 4.3, potential participants were invited to take part in the study, and were given time to consider whether they wished to take part along with the opportunity to ask questions. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and chose their own pseudonyms for use during the research write up. Anonymity has been given, but in the context of my study this will mean that only I will have knowledge of who said what, and have access to the interview recordings and transcriptions; the participants were informed that the interview(s) will be recorded and that I will be carrying out the transcription. Participants had the right to stop the interview at any time, and to withdraw from the study at any time.

As interviewer I was also aware that for some participants the topic of belonging could create distress, depending upon the nature of their experiences of the phenomenon. The support options available to students were made clear at the outset in the Participant Information Sheet, such as access to the Counselling Service if required, and I would have ensured that appropriate referrals were made if the participant wished to seek support following the interview.

I was aware also that participating in an interview is an inconvenience to some participants due to the time that they would be required to invest (approximately one hour of their time). In order to accommodate my participants I endeavoured to

undertake the interviews at a time of their choosing, subject to my own work commitments.

As with many interview scenarios, there exists a power relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. Although I am a member of staff at the University, it is highly unlikely that I would have had any direct contact with the participants prior to inviting them to participate in the research. In my current role I do not work with students in a one-to-one capacity or have a student-facing role, and I have no contact with any aspects of their academic study. Because of this I hoped that students would feel that they were able to make an informed decision about whether to engage with my study, and therefore I can see no reason to believe that coercion has been involved or that their decision to participate or not would have any negative impact on their University experience.

Finally, it is important to highlight the ethical issues involved in being a practice-based researcher. I am undertaking research at the institution in which I work and with this comes the possibility that my research could show my participants, the University or even myself in a bad light. This leads to an ethical dilemma: should I 'mute' any information or analysis that encroaches upon this? In response to this potential dilemma I will take as my overriding counsel the wish to do no harm. The use of a poststructuralist perspective on my data privileges the subjective and looks at the unconscious elements impacting on a situation. These are often attributed to a misrecognition, the unpicking of which could impact on our taken for granted practices, revealing things which are repressed in the chain of signifiers and signifieds. This should not be viewed as a harmful outcome, instead, it is an opportunity to add to the layers of practice-based research which came before mine and to open up debate, which should result in positive changes.

#### **4.5 Summary**

In this chapter I have outlined the methodological approach adopted for this research project. I have decided to situate the research within a poststructuralist framework, which aligns with my wish to 'problematize' the current practice in higher education: that is, to try and manage the experiences of 'belonging to a university community' in our undergraduate students. By taking a phenomenological approach using semi-structured interviews I will be able to focus on the experiences and understandings

of belonging and community produced by my student participants. The next chapter goes on to discuss the themes arising from the interviews.



## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter addresses the research aims by providing a phenomenological understanding of belonging through the themes identified during participant interviews. I then go on to discuss how the notion of community is understood by students in the context of the University.

It was apparent from early readings of the interview data that students' experiences of belonging were in many ways independent from the interventions provided by the University as a means to create a sense of belonging. This has challenged my practice, as instead of assuming that students need interventions to belong, I have been able to create an understanding which demonstrates the myriad ways in which students develop their own sense of belonging and the resources they have used (both emotional and physical) to facilitate this process.

This chapter outlines the three key themes which were identified during the data analysis phase: home; memories and stories; social networks. Each theme is presented as a concept with supporting quotations from my interviewees, and I return to the literature to provide an understanding of how each theme is connected to experiencing a sense of belonging, weaving a Lacanian perspective on the data throughout.

In section 5.4 I consider the notion of community as conceptualised by the students and examine the relationship this has with belonging within a university setting.

### **5.2 Lacan**

In this section I will give an overview of the key ideas I will be using from Jacques Lacan's work to provide an understanding of the data I collected during participant interviews. As discussed in the fourth chapter, I have chosen to use a theoretical framework which is based on the poststructuralist tradition. Jacques Lacan is a psychoanalytical theorist whose work is considered to be poststructuralist in nature (Easthope, 1991). Engagement with Lacan's work provided me with a framework through which I could critically analyse the identified themes, in particular through the Lacanian perspectives of the mirror stage, the imaginary and the Other. Using Lacan's work as a framework has enabled me to develop an understanding of

belonging which reveals the tensions involved in the navigation of the symbolic order of university life.

### **5.2.2 Overview of Lacan's theory**

Lacan's theory of the mirror stage is crucial to understanding how he structures the development of identity. Lacan argues that humans, when infants, identify with an image which is external to themselves (be it by looking in a mirror or by seeing another child). Lacan theorises that this identification with an Other enables infants to develop a mastery over their own bodies, as they view themselves as a 'complete' entity for the first time. However, this is structured as a bittersweet experience as it is based on a mis-recognition – their sense of self is based upon an image and is thus intensely alienating. From this moment on, the infant child will forever find their ego in the Other, which serves to give them the sense that they are a unified being. From this image they gain the sense of a coherent self. Lacan calls this the 'imaginary'.

It is during the mirror stage that the ego is formed. Homer (2005, p.25) states that, 'the ego is the effect of images; it is, in short, an imaginary function ... it is the function of the ego to maintain this illusion of coherence and mastery'. Therefore, the ego's task is to maintain this mis-recognition which permeates the rest of the infant's life. Bannet (1989, p.15) states 'it is in the imaginary image that the child sees his identity and his unity, around the image that he orders his experience and his environment, and the image that he attaches his desire'. The infant's existence is forever dependent upon their recognition by an Other.

Whilst a child is captured by the 'imaginary' from an ocular point of view, they are also trapped by the symbolic which Lacan describes as the social structures, mediated through language, which the child is born in to and which pre-exist the child. These are structures which will continue to impact on the child for the whole of its life. Lacan states

'... the relation of the imaginary and the real, and in the constitution of the world such as results from it, everything depends on the position of the subject. And the position of the subject ... is essentially characterised by its place in the symbolic world, in other words in the world of speech.'

([1975]/1991, p.80)

Lacan describes how the subject's entry into discourse shapes their identity by giving the example of how a child is named by its parents before it is even born, and the parents' hopes and dreams for their child will have an effect on the construction of the child's identity.

The experience of the imaginary and the symbolic is alienating, as it divides the subject against itself and results in unfulfilled desire. Bannet (1989, p.16) states:

'The ego is not identical with the subject. It is a mask of conformity, a collection of bric-a-brac gathered in society's socialised envelope or detachable skin ... The ego is other than the subject, and only tangentially coincides with the subject's real development'.

As the ego is developed on the basis of an image, it is separate (and divided) from the self; it is made up of a collage of images appropriated by the subject, in order to form a coherent identity.

The symbolic must be engaged with if humans are to communicate successfully within the world because there is no other way to 'be' if one is to be able to communicate. Lacan states that 'development only takes place in so far as the subject integrates himself into the symbolic system, acts within it, asserts himself in it through the use of genuine speech' ([1975]/1991, p.86). Humans become what they are through the web of symbolic structures within the world.

The symbolic places boundaries and rules around what can and cannot be, and it also places these structures around subjectivity. It is through language, the symbolic order, that our limitations are dictated. According to Lacan, language brings with it the possibility of a lack – language is always underwritten by something which cannot be spoken. Language, and therefore the symbolic, is a system which necessarily occludes part of itself. Of this, Homer states 'as individual subjects we can never fully grasp the social or symbolic totality that constitutes the sum of our universe, but that totality has a structuring force upon us as subjects' (2005, p.44).

The need to engage with the Other, the symbolic order, necessarily entails a sense of loss because it represents a move away from the real which is understood as that part of us which is the organic being which exists outside of the signifying system. The real is 'repressed and operates through the unconscious. It resists symbolisation

through language as it precedes language. Shepherdson (2008) explains the Lacanian real as 'neither inside or outside the symbolic, but is more like an "internal void"' (p.8), the real is within the symbolic order. Shepherdson uses the terms 'the intimate alterity of the real' to describe this understanding of the real which sees it being not exactly inside or outside the symbolic. The result of this is a sense of disruption or a desire which cannot be realised because it cannot be realised within the realm of the Other; it exists outside of language. Easthope describes this as follows:

'In the process of desire the subject is always constitutive though only within the terms of the social formation within which it is constituted, since what may figure as an object of desire is socially and historically discovered ... under the system of commodity production' (Easthope, 1991, p.21).

The 'real' is the absence which is felt by human beings. The real cannot be wholly grasped as the rules and laws which structure the symbolic and give it meaning put the real out of grasp. Easthope describes Lacan's subject as:

'constructed to live as a free agent, produced to act as if unproduced. Ideology now comes to be defined effectively as the whole of my lived experience and cultural identity, all that I am beyond what is biologically given, the body' (1991, p.40).

The Lacanian (and poststructuralist) view of the subject is contrary to modern conceptions of the self which represent the individual as a unified whole who is free to determine his / her own meanings in the world. Lacan's work has been used to provide understandings of a variety of issues and concepts, from visual media to 'issues of post communism, racism, terrorism, and the political upheavals of a world undergoing a fast and painful globalization' (Rabate, 2003, p.XV). I will weave Lacan's theory throughout the next section of this chapter.

## **5.3 Themes**

### **5.3.1 Stories, memories and rituals**

When reflecting on their experiences of belonging, one of the most recurring themes from student interviews was the role of memories and stories in giving students a sense of belonging. Students talked of their memories and stories playing an

important part in shaping, understanding and giving meaning to their experiences of belonging.

The theme of memories was explicitly discussed by the students, for example Gabby spoke of the process of 'creating memories' as being important in developing her sense of belonging, *"There's times where we've made, most of us, memories of University. It's where we'll remember making the friends that we'll probably carry through life"*. These memories, which involved her new friends, became stories which they shared together, reinforcing the creation of shared experiences. These stories were repeated and laughed about, the repetition of the stories most often taking place within their halls of residence - in particular in the corridors where communal activity was not supposed to take place. The corridor as a space featured heavily in the students' descriptions of belonging and memory making. This is one of the few communal spaces within their residential halls, with many of them living in en-suite and fully-catered accommodation. As a space, the corridor is a place where particular social formations and practices are enabled.

Conversely, the corridor also had significance in being a space which challenges a sense of belonging, which is shown when Dylan says *"I don't go out and sit in the hallway and socialise with everyone else. I used to at the start of the year, but it was too difficult to be nice to people I really don't like"*. Dylan believes she has witnessed the reality: that what the corridor enables is a façade of a happy student experience. This makes her uncomfortable and she retreats to her own room, removing herself from this scenario. She does not wish to engage with the 'expected behaviors' of the corridor. However there is a contradiction in Dylan's narrative which later reveals a realisation that not engaging in these behaviours has negatively impacted on her sense of belonging. Despite understanding that engaging with others in the corridor would have to be a 'pretense' or façade, she realises that she needs to do this to be successful in this context. Her later desire for the recognition by others as someone who belongs is, I argue, the desire to be sutured into the fabric of the University and to fix, therefore, a stable identity as 'student' for herself.

The students' desire to repeat stories from their memories and the impact this has on creating a sense of belonging is interesting from a Lacanian perspective. Lacan would argue that this practice is an attempt by the individual to recreate (through

remembering) the Other; emphasizing their place in the symbolic order. However, memories are nothing more than signifiers, signifying something which lies beyond or out of reach. They are an attempt to reconstruct the past and to bring it in to the present. For Lacan, they are 'inextricably linked to the imaginary, and that first formation of the unitary ego that persists through all change, unable to forget, and seeking throughout the course of its history to gather itself together, to recollect itself' (Shepherdson, 1993, p.27). The recounting of stories can be understood as an attempt to fill the gap, or the absence, created by the 'real'. The students are trying to fill the unavoidable void by recounting stories which give them a sense of purpose within the University environment. This serves to provide a coherent understanding of their place within the symbolic order. This practice is driven by a desire – and here their stories and memories are described as a desire to create for themselves a sense of belonging, a desire to live out their hopes that their University experience will be the best days of their lives. This desire could be driven by a Lacanian need to provide a sense of a unified ego (the student identity in this case), therefore concealing any lack they may be experiencing.

By narrating their stories together, the students are using the Other as a way of reflecting their experiences back to themselves, and convincing themselves of their unified identity as student within this new context – enabling them to belong within the University environment. Their identity as student is constituted outside of their bodies, and their desire for a unifying experience as a subject beyond the real is being lived out as successfully as possible.

Moving away from Lacan for a moment, the participants' descriptions were also resonant of Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* (1994), as the stories which were recounted amongst the students took place within their halls of residence and therefore the particularity of this space is relevant. Bachelard states '... if I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace' (1994, p.6). Through Bachelard's work we can understand the inter-connectivity between spaces and the imagination, and this is reflected in the students' stories of their experiences of belonging.

For Bachelard, the intimacy of the house, produced through its 'insideness' makes it an appropriate metaphor for producing a phenomenological study of the inner mental space. The intimacy of the corridor space for the students made it a place where they were comfortable in sharing their memories. This space is also *"somewhere we'll all just be sat in our pyjamas like chilling with a drink or chocolate, just chatting, remembering the funny things we've done"* (Hannah). Bachelard puts forward the view that memories are a means of bringing the history into the present 'in the theatre of the past that is constituted by memory, the stage setting maintains the characters in their dominant roles' (ibid., p. 8) and therefore enables the memories to play an important part in current experience. Memories create a sense of security for the students (understood as belonging) as they represent a continuity in their new lives, and provide a normative point from which to direct their future experiences. Their rehearsal within the corridors is a performative act of belonging. They act to maintain the rules of the symbolic order and to preserve their identities as students – they are behaving in a way which belongs to their student identity and the re-enactment cements their experiences and indeed their identity.

Memories were also described as being important to experiencing a sense of belonging by Daniel, who found his sense of belonging was experienced through his engagement with the stories and rituals of the hockey society. He had a strong sense of entering into the hockey community due to his engagement with their stories and rituals, which provided the symbols of belonging to this society. This student experienced his sense of belonging through the stories and rituals of those who had preceded him. During our interview he reflected on his experience of being a member of the hockey society, saying:

*"One of the traditions of the males is on a night out we got to the [pub in the city] and we get a shot of port and all the captains and committee members do a speech about whatever has happened in the day or the week, and at the end obviously we always say "always a pleasure never a chore" and we say that and drink the port. Those words have always been said and it's a part of a tradition we continue. There is no swearing and there's no ladness and if you do you'll be thrown out. It's civilised and you reflect on the week."* (Daniel)

Relph states that:

‘much ritual and custom and myth has the incidental if not deliberate effect of strengthening attachment to place by reaffirming not only the sanctity and unchanging significance of it, but also the enduring relationships between a people and their place’ (1976, p.33).

Although Daniel’s experiences with the hockey society echo this, particularly where he talked of looking forward to coaching and mentoring new first years when he progresses to his second year, thus reinforcing and continuing his sense of belonging, from a Lacanian perspective this performance will always be driven by desire. In this respect, Relph’s notions of ‘sanctity’ and ‘unchanging significance’ are idealistic at best, and are inconsistent with Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory. The occasional visits from the ‘old boys’ (alumni) were important for re-enforcing the continuation of these traditions, *“the old boys came back and played as alumni last week, and I was talking to them about how things were, how things have changed slightly but still sticking to the traditions that we have, just being a team”* (Daniel). Here the continuity provided by memories is viewed by Daniel as important in enabling him to experience a sense of belonging.

To view this through a Lacanian lens, Daniel is receiving validation of his self through his active and fulfilling involvement in the hockey society – he is fully engaging with their culture and traditions and is accepted by them, as a member who belongs. His sense of belonging within the hockey society is realised through these external relationships, as an extension of his self. It can also be understood as fulfilment of the human drive to impose an order and meaning where there is no order and meaning. The routine, rituals and continuity provided through the hockey society are resonant of Lacan’s notion of the ‘gaze’, where:

‘the gaze is not necessarily the face of our fellow being, it could just as easily be the window behind which we assume he is lying in wait for us. It is an x, the object when faced with which the subject becomes object’ (Lacan, [1975]/1991, p.220).

The gaze has the ability to produce effects depending upon the angle by which it views an object. Daniel’s involvement with the hockey society preserves his self-



identity as a hockey player; he operates within the constraints of the symbolic order of the hockey society which enables him to experience a sense of belonging. It is through the gaze of the 'Other' that Daniel's identity is constructed, 'since our identity is constituted in interaction with what is outside of us and reflects us, it is relational – a notion that introduces the idea of difference into the process of identity construction' (Bertens, 2001, p.161). The hockey society is integral to Daniel's University experience – his identity is constructed in a relational pattern through his engagement with the stories and rituals.

The practices which Daniel refers to, such as drinking the port and repeating the same statement every time they meet, are all part of a symbolic system, which is heavy with the meanings of tradition and continuity, and which demonstrates membership of a specific group. Daniel has fully engaged with this symbolic system which is replete with the meanings of belonging and it has therefore understandably been described by him as playing a significant part in his experience of belonging within the University.

The memories and stories rehearsed by the students centred on their social experiences of University rather than their academic experiences. This may be a reflection of the perception put forward by many of the students that the first year 'doesn't count', 'you just have to pass'. Gabby even went as far as to say that she would have paid for the social experience in the first year, but was, however, intending to concentrate on her academic experience in her second year, "*I'm actually, this year, I was paying to be here, more than anything. It didn't contribute to my final grade. But next year I'm paying to pass, I'm paying to get a degree. This year was my year to mess around this was.*" Reflecting this notion back to chapter three, I would argue that this perception is a potent and malign side effect of the neo-liberal influence on higher education: that in the clamour to 'sell' higher education to individuals, the 'student experience' has been pushed by marketing professionals as involving far more than the academic achievement of a degree qualification. This is, arguably, the result of the competitive environment we are now in, resulting in the original purpose of higher education being lost. Dylan seemed to exemplify this notion when she stated during her interview "*I mean uni is about cocking up really isn't it, it's what you're meant to do, cos we're 18 and stupid [laughs]*", referring to the fact that she was due to return for a second opportunity at her first year "*so next year*

*I'm aware of what not to do you know*" – she was looking forward to socialising *more* as she did not feel that she had done enough of this first time around.

From a poststructuralist perspective, Dylan's thoughts on the University experience she had undergone to date were resonant of the signifier / signified; the ultimate signification of what university means is kept out of Dylan's grasp. She has produced new signifiers "*uni is about cocking up really isn't it*" which have no final guarantee, and certainly do not have congruence with others' understanding of university. However, her interpretation of her situation is enabling her to return in September for a second chance where she will be "*aware of what not to do*", where she intends to actively participate in the commonly shared (student) understanding of the student experience and therefore experience a stronger sense of belonging. The realisation that she needs to have active participation with other students in order to experience a sense of belonging is resonant with Lacanian theory which posits that identity is constructed through interaction with the Other. Dylan needs to ensure this interaction with other students in order to create her identity as a student and therefore experience a stronger sense of belonging than she had previously.

The consumerist / student experience marketing that portrays university as 'the best years of your life' was very much at the forefront of the students' minds. In one sense, it seemed that students were actively creating memories for future imagined nostalgia, where nostalgia is defined as "A sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past" (n.d.Oxford Dictionaries Online). The mass-market constructed ideal of the student experience had led some of the students to regret or pine for the student experience they hoped they would have – realising that what they had been sold was in fact part fantasy and things were not as they had imagined them to be. This reflects Lacan's notion of the 'real', where the real is represented as the elusive student experience which is beyond the reach of the students, or that which 'resists symbolisation absolutely' ([1975]/1991, p.66). The pre-imagined experiences which students had expected to realise whilst at University create a fracture when they do not come to fruition and therefore impact on a sense of belonging. For Lacan this strongly reflects the notion of a forever unfulfilled desire. The following interview excerpts demonstrate this:

*"I thought it would be like where your course really inspires you to do things and erm people say it's the best years of your life and that sort of thing and it's just been an uphill struggle since day one. I've kind of just sort of had to fight the whole time I've been here to keep going and not go 'right that's it, I'm dropping out'" (Dylan)*

*"I got into a 6th form and did my A-Levels and did A-Levels and worked my bum off to get to the uni I wanted to go to and I get here and it's it a bit like 'right ... I'm here' do you know what I mean like? And it's ... I don't know whether everyone feels this or not but it's a come down" (Olivia)*

The elusive, out of reach student experience which students had been expecting, offered them the impossible possibility of a 'full student experience' or the impossible full identity of 'student'. The striving and desire for this elusive student experience demonstrates Lacan's notion of a lack and it is this lack which continues to drive desire for the students.

This also reflects Baudrillard's notion that authentic experiences have been displaced, 'instead of a true reality, we get various types of simulacra, which present themselves as real' (Hegarty, 2004, p.49), students were expecting something different to the reality of the first year experience. Authentic experience here is that which is symbolically constructed through our own norms, expectations and ideals as they relate to a higher education experience. When their expectations were not initially realised, they sought to form memories which could be recounted as stories which provided them with a sense of continuity and belonging within the context of their own individual student experiences.

Unmet expectations based on the reality of experience can also be theorised through Plato's notion of the 'real' as described in Book VII (514a-521d) of the Republic. For Plato there is the timeless and unchanging 'real' which describes universal perfection such as that found in mathematics, but which is not replicated through our everyday experiences of reality. In Plato's Republic, Socrates uses the allegory of men in a cave watching the shadows created by a fire dancing on the cave walls. When one of the prisoners leaves the cave and sees that the shadows are in fact the result of a fire he is jeered by the others as they do not comprehend that what they have been experiencing is a shadow rather than a reality. The image is confused with the reality. Once again, this renders the 'real' student experience beyond the grasp of

my student participants and leaves them with a sense that they have not been able to achieve the 'real' authentic experience, which is largely based on an image mediated through the media.

The stories which students both rehearsed themselves and which came to them via the media of a consumer society and presented them with a notion of 'student' which they wanted to appropriate, revealed the incomplete identity of student and the complex path which the participants in this research navigated in order to experience a sense of belonging.

### **5.3.2 Place and home**

The theme of place and home is, of course, particularly relevant to the student population that I have chosen as the focus for this research study, as all of the participants had moved away from home to attend University. It is therefore not surprising that they have identified the notion of home as being a key facet of their experience of belonging.

Olwig (1999) identifies two meanings for home:

'First, it can refer to a site where everyday life is lived, often surrounded by close family, and second, it can mean a place associated with a notion of belonging, of feeling 'at home'. These two meanings of home are, ideally, expected to coincide, so that one feels at home in the physical site where one lives'. (p.83)

The experience of belonging was described by the students as being attached to the physical place of their halls / the city as well as being an emotional experience, as demonstrated in some of the interview extracts below:

*"I feel like I belong mostly here, sort of at [halls of residence] but I'm still getting used to the whole city thing cos obviously you've got the residents that have their own thoughts on us ummmm as you're aware of the people among you that know you're a student and you're sort of like, 'I'm not always drunk', but mostly I am quite comfortable in this place" (Nicole)*

*“I feel like more comfortable walking around town and it does feel like home now, it feels like to just walk out the door and ‘ahhhhh’ it’s like my second home now” (Nicole)*

*“I feel I belong up to a certain point within my own flat. I’ve like, that is my home, my parents is not home anymore.” (Dylan)*

The idea that belonging is related to place, and particularly with reference to Nicole’s second interview extract above, is relevant to de Certeau’s work on the Practice of Everyday Life (1984), where value is to be found (or in this case, a sense of belonging) in the everyday practices of human life. He talks of spaces and the act of walking through them: ‘a rich indetermination gives them, by means of a semantic rarefaction, the function of articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning’ (de Certeau, 1984, p.105). According to de Certeau, people subvert the institutional / governmental structures that have been put in place, ‘a migrational or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city’ (ibid., p.93). For the students and their descriptions of their experiences of belonging, de Certeau’s practice of everyday life and its ability to work at a different level to that ‘planned’ by those in a position of authority resonates with the students’ very non-institutional experiences of belonging.

The themes of home and place were referred to frequently by the students and were defined as both the physicality (and distance) of the home they had left behind and the emotional experience of home being somewhere they belong. In tandem with this, some of the students spoke of the process of transferring the idea of home from one physical place to another and this was a process which helped them to understand that they now had a sense of belonging at the University. For the students, this process of transference was not understood to be a swap, where the family home was swapped for the University. Rather it was defined as being on a continuum, with the family home at one end and the University at the other, and with the student traversing up and down the continuum throughout their first year experience.

The process of experiencing University as a ‘home’ was described as being confusing, as well as being painful at times too. For the students who experienced a

sense of home within the University environment, there was a sense of displacement from the family home initially, with the University being seen as a temporary resting place. They then spoke of the gradual process of developing a sense of belonging to this new place and an eventual scenario where University might even supersede the family home as their primary understanding of home. This process was described by Gabby:

*“It’s really strange ‘cos ... sort of like ... err ... after Christmas, well Christmas time I kept getting really confused just ‘cos ... whether I’m talking about actual ... like going back to Yorkshire or here I was saying ... well when am I going home, when are we going home? That were me and my boyfriend talking about ... erm ... going back to Yorkshire ... we were like oh well we’ll go home on this day and then we’ll come back home on this day and we were like ... by the end of it we were like where are we talking about ... which way are we coming, which way are we going? It was really strange” (Gabby)*

However, there was also evidence to suggest that viewing the University as home and a place of belonging was a temporary state which could easily change and result in a longing for the family home, which could have a serious impact on a sense of belonging. Nicole described this homesickness as *“it’s just more the feeling of missing home that rocks your foundations”*. Although there was relief in viewing the University as home, there was also pain at times when homesickness set in.

Relph (1976, p.55) would determine this gradual feeling of belonging to a place as ‘empathetic insideness’ where

‘to be inside a place empathetically is to understand that place as rich in meaning, and hence to identify with it, for these meanings are not only linked to the experiences and symbols of those whose place it is, but also stem from one’s own experiences’.

A feeling of empathetic insideness develops as one becomes more intimately involved with the identity of a place and a sense of belonging will grow as an appreciation of the identity of the place grows. This is close to, but not the same as ‘existential insideness’ which ‘characterises belonging to a place and the deep and complete identity with a place that is the very foundation of the place concept’

(Relph, 1976, p.55). However, it is important to temper Relph's idealistic notion that people can enjoy a full and complete belonging to place by considering the Lacanian perspective on this. The three registers of the psyche of the Lacanian subject: the real, the imaginary and the symbolic order, are always working in tension with each other and as such a complete identity with a place, as proposed by Relph, is not possible from a Lacanian perspective. All but one of the students I interviewed appeared to identify their home (as in family home) with existential insideness, and it does not seem realistic that we, the University, could hope for existential insideness within the student experience. Indeed, the feelings of being at home in the University were soon disrupted when the students had to choose where to live in their second year. Students variously described this experience as 'stressful', 'upsetting' and 'uncomfortable', as it required them to make choices about which friends to live with (necessarily leaving some people out) and also decisions regarding their choice of housing, which required both quick thinking and negotiation with others – one student said this process enabled her to see "*what my friends were really like*" and subsequently left her questioning whether she still wanted to live with them. There was a clear sense that students felt obliged to belong even where it was obvious that they did not, most clearly represented through Dylan who eventually decided that she would return for a second attempt at her first year and would behave in a different way in order to feel a greater sense of belonging to this place.

The idea that a student could see "*what my friends were really like*" is interesting from a Lacanian perspective. The stress of moving accommodation had meant the identity projected by some of the students had waivered and the 'real' had been glimpsed. This had likely impacted further on the students' sense of belonging as place / home and consequently who they were choosing to live with became significant in their University experience. The obligation to 'fit in' and for 'home' to be somewhere you belonged had the effect in some cases of revealing the tenuous and fragile relationship of belonging within the University environment.

The intimate involvement with place described by Relph is articulated by the students as their growing knowledge and familiarity with the local area, as well as through the memories and stories they had created (especially in their corridors) within their new homes. Growing familiarity and intimacy with the place was articulated as knowing short-cuts through the campus or knowing which pubs and

clubs they like the best. The notion of familiarity is also discussed later where the students' understanding of a university community is explored.

The physical space of the residential halls was also characterised as somewhere that the students could have some sense of control and creativity, and simply 'be themselves'. There is a sense that the students could express their own identities within the privacy of their study rooms. They talked of setting up photograph collages of family and friends from back home, helping to create a space to which they could attribute a sense of belonging. The notion of the private space enabling the student to 'be themselves' is relevant to their sense of a coherent identity. They feel a sense of belonging and almost a relief when they are in their own space as they are not under the gaze of the Other here; they can 'be themselves', the implication being that they are working to present a coherent identity when they are in the presence of the Other.

In addition, students spoke of materially transforming the space of their student room through the purchase of rugs, cushions and even a blow-up settee. This practice was understood by the students as creating a sense of belonging to their room for them, changing it from a space which felt initially quite alien to a place of comfort, Cameron stating of his study bedroom, *"I've made that home, I've put up posters and stuff so that does feel like home"*. In this sense they truly start to inhabit their space. This practice is also resonant of Relph's (1976, p.49) work on insideness and outsideness. He argues that with all places, 'to be inside a place is to belong to it and to identify with it, and the more profoundly inside you are the stronger is this identity with the place'. For Relph, being 'inside a place' is characterised by feelings of being safe and at ease and, phenomenologically, these experiences allow the University to take on the identity of home. It is important to note that notions of insideness and outsideness reside on a continuum and students actively worked to position themselves 'inside' through the practices which I describe in this chapter. Students appeared to find their feelings of belonging within the inside of their rooms where they had some freedom to express themselves, whereas they did not always feel that they belonged in other areas of the University.

This is in stark contrast to the academic sphere where there were expectations about assignment production and lecture and seminar attendance. These practices were



viewed as performative in nature, as something which has to happen in order to survive the first year and progress to the second year, and were secondary to their experiences of being in their residences or engaged in social activities.

Heidegger's essay titled 'Building dwelling thinking', in which he argues that building and dwelling are linked in a relationship with the notion of being, echoes with the experiences described by my research participants. Heidegger argues that the notion of dwelling precedes building, 'only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build' (2011, p.254), and as such dwelling is a mode of being in the world. He uses various examples to illustrate his argument which is that not all buildings are dwellings, although dwelling is produced through building. For example, he illustrates his point thus: 'the chief engineer is at home in the power station, but he does not dwell there' (2011, p.244). The same could be said of non-residential students and the University buildings, where they can feel 'at home' some of the time, in some places. This example reveals Heidegger's belief that building and dwelling exist in a relationship with each other whereby our ability to become dwellers is through our propensity to build, and these activities establish relationships with each other, Heidegger states that, 'dwelling ... is the basic character of Being' (2011, p.254).

As for the student participants, their will to experience a sense of belonging and the sense of home they refer to in their halls of residence (their dwelling place within the context of the University) is resonant of Heidegger's notion of dwelling. This notion, which is also linked to neighbour, and 'to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for' (2011, p.245) can be said to be linked, therefore, to a sense of community and the emotional sense of feeling 'at home'. However, home as a dwelling place in the context of the University does not appear to have been felt as profoundly as described by Heidegger. This I would argue is due to the transient nature of being a student – the University is usually part of your life for three years and you may expect to live in different accommodation for each of those three years. This aligns with Nancy's notion of community, where 'being-with' is a spontaneous event, rather than being a relationship of dependency such as in Heidegger's theory where dwelling precedes building.

Where the practices described earlier (buying cushions, putting up pictures etc.) enabled the students to experience a sense of belonging within their new

environment, it is important to highlight a theoretical tension between Heidegger's notion of the neighbour and Lacan's notion of the Other. For Heidegger, being and dwelling entail a sense of love for the neighbour. Conversely, for Lacan, the presence of the Other is an alienating experience because it marks the point at which one realises their ego, and with it the need to maintain the illusion that they are a unified and cohesive being. This represents a constant and alienating struggle to maintain a cohesive sense of unity. The student participants made reference at times to the importance of a sense of neighbourliness, and also the struggle they experienced in maintaining a sense of themselves in the face of the Other (or the neighbour).

Blunt and Dowling (2006, p.2) describe home as 'a spatial imaginary: a set of intersecting and variable ideas and feelings, which are related to context, and which construct places, extend across spaces and scales, and connect places'. References to belonging in the context of 'feeling at home' at University were very much centred on the students' halls of residence, rather than the wider University environment. The attachment to their study bedroom, corridor or communal kitchen space as a place where they could 'be themselves' is also reflective of Heidegger's notion of dwelling. The halls of residence become a place of dwelling, whereas the wider University buildings and campus were not explicitly described as being somewhere the participants felt 'at home'. A sense of belonging was often explicitly experienced as feeling 'at home' – as an emotional affective experience. This resonates with Tuan's (1975, p.154) conceptualisation of home:

'The primary meaning of home is nurturing shelter. It is the one place in which we can openly and comfortably admit our frailty and our bodily needs. Home is devoted to the sustenance of the body. In the home we feed, wash, and rest; to it we go when we are tired or sick, that is, when we can no longer maintain a brave front before the world'.

Students reported great efforts to socialise within their residences, even where they had specifically requested self-contained en-suite rooms with kitchen facilities. Belonging here is defined as intimacy with other residents. For example, two students independently of each other said that the advice they would give to new first years is "bring a door-stop" so that the private realm of the study room becomes a

more public space and opens the opportunity for interaction (however, blocking doors open with door stops is against University regulations as it is a fire risk!). Here we can draw connections between the relief of not being under the gaze of the Other which comes from self-contained space, but also the need for the Other to gain a coherent sense of identity. Of great importance to many of the students was the corridor in their halls of residence, as discussed already. Daniel stated that:

*“We pulled a lot of people into the corridors just chilling with a drink, and during the first 2 weeks the corridor door was open, so people would come round, like the whole 3rd floor and they would all be out talking and we had some good speakers and we got them going”*

Students understood their halls of residence as being a place that they belonged which is spatially separate to their University attendance / the academic sphere of their life. Much in the way that workers leave home in the morning and return in the evening, so did the students. One student talked of sitting around the kitchen table in the evening, talking about their day with their neighbours / other residents of the hall. This links to Heidegger’s notion of dwelling, where neighbour plays a key part. This suggests an attempt to replicate a familial feeling within the University experience. For these students, the emotional support of their peer group, with whom they now share their dwelling along with communal meal times, represents a closeness which they had not experienced with their friends from home and in turn this created a new bond which was more akin to family than friend.

University methods for managing halls of residence, such as a decision to lock the inter-connecting doors which divide two corridors and to shut down the communal space as punishment for damage caused during a party the night before, are reflected in the students’ accounts as putting at risk their sense of belonging to their ‘home’. This highlights the fragility of their sense of belonging to a place which they view as home. This particular example highlights a conflict between University policy which aims to engender a sense of belonging within students, and operational practices which actually challenge a sense of belonging. This presents an opportunity to review the punishments which are used in halls of residence as they may unduly damage students’ sense of ‘home’ which is so intrinsically related to a sense of belonging.

Despite a sense of belonging being experienced as 'home' by many of the students, there was also an understanding that this was a transient phase and that being at University was a stage in life's journey which would hopefully result in a permanent home, family and meaningful work. This of course reflects the transitional nature of university, as a place which students pass through. However, the concepts of daily life paths and 'time-space continuity, or the degree to which successive daily paths resemble one another and occur in the same locale, shapes personal identity and its subjective connotation' (Rowe & Wolch, 1990, p.190). This suggests that the longer routine and daily life paths continue, the stronger the sense of identity to the person or student. An important element of this sense of place and identity is that of social networks and this is the next theme which I will explore.

### **5.3.3 Social networks / family and friends**

The third theme which emerged through analysis of the interview data was that of the importance of social networks in creating a sense of belonging. The notion of family within the University environment was talked about, where students explicitly used familial terms in relation to their friends and staff of the University, as described in the extracts below:

*"He's [Personal Tutor] kind of looked after me while I've been "I don't know what to do" errm yeah, he's a big part of my support base that has kind of kept me here. He's kind of adopted me" (Dylan)*

*"I belong to the University, I belong at the University I earned my place here but if you were to ask me if the University was my family I'd say no it's not, the people I've lived with are my University family, they are my friends I've made in the Uni, I've not openly made, I speak with people on my course but they're not my friends they're more like work colleagues, they're not people I get on with that much" (Gabby)*

*"I do feel that they're really supportive in what they do, they do have that parental role, rather than just being someone to go to to see how you are progressing" (Louise)*

*"yeah I feel like we are more kind of like a family whereas the people on my courses are people like at school or associates whereas in my corridor it's the*

*people I go home to and say 'oh I've had such a bad day and all this, and they are there for you and they helps you out and helps you out with food and things like that. That's more like family' (Hannah)*

*"it's literally like you're coming to University and you've got another mum cos she's just like there all the time, she emails me, she texts me, she rings me whatever, she'll make sure I'm ok" (Gabby).*

This theme has had both a positive and negative impact on the sense of belonging experienced by students. Returning to Rowe and Wolch's (1990) time space continuity, the social networks that the students created, and which they said were critical in creating a sense of belonging, are suggestive of an attempt to ensure a sense of continuity. This is particularly relevant to the students who created a 'family' within the University, who they would return home to each day and discuss their experiences with. Gabby states:

*"We made a family; we call each other our corridor family. We have like family meals each week where we all chip in £3 and we go to the supermarket and buy everything. We all cook different things, we do things like that, when it's someone's birthday we all put money in and get a present and card and we go out together we don't ever like not see each other. We see each other every day and we make a conscious effort to do that".*

The importance of social networks, both with their peers and also the academic and support staff within the University assisted the students in achieving a sense of belonging and to build a sense of family within the University context.

Students talked about detaching themselves from their family in order to feel that they belong at University and of parents feeling upset as their son / daughter starts referring to University as 'home'. This is met with an associated feeling of guilt from the student. Louise stated *"After a couple of weeks I was just used to it, and was calling it home and things. Yeah my mum wasn't very happy about it"*. Here, the students appear to be struggling to maintain the cohesive identity which Lacan argues is our driving force in life. Students are traversing a path which sees them constructing themselves as both student and son / daughter and depending upon who they are with they are reflecting a different version of themselves.

Looking beyond their immediate housemates, on multiple occasions students spoke of the high regard in which they held students in the second and third years, and academic staff. This can be viewed through a Lacanian perspective as being symptomatic of the symbolic order. The first year student enters a pre-existing symbolic order which positions the student in a particular way. Lacan states: ‘and the position of the subject ... is essentially characterised by its place in the symbolic world, in other words in the world of speech’ ([1975]/1991, p.80). In doing so, the first year student enters a discursive formation which represents them as inferior to second years, third years, academic staff etc. This is present in their discussions on a sense of belonging as incidents where second or third year students had spoken with them, worked with them, or recognised them in some way which was identified as being instrumental in delivering a sense of belonging. It is as though this brought them into existence. Daniel stated: *“the elder students you look up to, watch them play and look up to them”* and Amber said of the Student Union Sabbatical Officers: *“I’ve appreciated that and it is quite nice to know that they know who you are and they like, we’re the president we’re going to talk to you, we’re here to just run things past you for your opinion or whatever”*.

This notion is also present in the ways that students talked of their experiences when they first arrived, and their internal dialogues, as demonstrated in the following extracts from the interview data:

*“Yeah you didn’t really know how to act and what to do and the right things to say to people. I didn’t know how to act like your complete self or do you just like see how other people are and things like that” (Hannah)*

*“I think I was the only person that ever thinks this, but being accepted by the other years, you’re all new and everyone’s like ‘it’s the new first years’ and you’re sort of like, you don’t wanna do anything stupid or something that sort of makes them think that you’re not normal” (Nicole).*

The notion of being accepted in the University environment knowing ‘how to act’ suggest that the students were conscious that there was a way ‘to be’ and that others would notice if you did not act in the correct way – this resonates again with Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory. The students assumed that there was a manner of being which some were concerned they may not grasp and would therefore appear

to be 'not normal'. The importance attached therefore to belonging to a friendship group ('university family' or club and society) is understood as the validation that one had managed to fit into the pre-existing symbolic culture of the University. Amber captures this below:

*"I feel where I most belong I would say its split between my halls and the women's football club. Cos you know that I'm really, really friendly and I love to bits the guys that I live with and it's kind of the same with the girls that I play football with cos I'm living with them next year".*

Social relationships and their importance in creating a sense of belonging, when viewed through a Lacanian perspective can be understood as being fundamental in providing the process of recognition through which the confirmation of a coherent sense of self is sought. Students are creating networks of mutual recognition through which they create their shared stories and experiences. In the case of the student participants, their sense of belonging is constituted externally to themselves, through this process of recognition in the Other. This recognition, which is bestowed on them by others, gives validation to their identity as 'student' within the University context.

There was a focus on the social when students talked of their expectations of University not being met. Dylan had not created social networks within the University, finding her sense of belonging in her room, and Olivia had not met people 'like her' and had struggled to find where she could fit in, finally finding a music night in a bar in the city centre where she met friends and felt she belonged. Both Dylan's and Olivia's experiences demonstrated a struggle in creating a sense of belonging within the University context. Dylan turns in on herself, finding comfort in her room as she has not been able to construct a 'student experience', nor truly inhabit that role. From a Lacanian perspective, Dylan did not successfully engage with the symbolic. Olivia spent the majority of her first year looking for something that would enable her to belong as a student. The relief at finding a student music night was enough to enable her to stay at University, having considered leaving at Christmas. During the interview with both Dylan and Olivia I felt a concern myself as I could see that they were struggling to 'fit in' – demonstrating my own culturally informed and embedded views of what a student *should* be.

The inability of Dylan and Olivia to experience University as a 'student' in the way that they had anticipated that they would is symptomatic of the symbolic breaking down. Things are not as they 'should' be. Dylan and Olivia showed resilience in persevering and doing what they could do, repairing this rupture and making University the experience that they wanted it to be.

However, this has to be understood in the context of the students being residential. The University is constructed as a place where they can 'hang out' as well as being a higher education establishment. Nicole summed this up as follows:

*"I mean obviously you've got the academic side, but I just think of it not as an education place necessarily but it's somewhere you can hang out, you can go to the Student Union or here [on campus café] and just have lunch or something, you don't necessarily have to be learning and you can see your friends everywhere as well, so it's quite nice and relaxed really I think it helped me settle"*

The success with which they manage to 'hang out' out in this environment, and therefore experience belonging is very much constructed through the social rather than the academic elements of University life. For Baudrillard, capitalism and the associated consumer society has led to the disposal of our 'traditional link with objects – a link that is symbolic due to the direct working of an object, rather than the distance of control' (Hegarty, 2004, p.16). By this, Hegarty is referring to the distance created through automation for example, where the original function of an object is removed (or distanced) through this development. In the extract from Nicole's interview there is a suggestion that belonging at University is somewhat independent from the University's function as an institution of learning, its original function being side-lined and the need for social relationships becoming symbolically important. We are relating to objects within a signifying structure, rather than through their utility alone.

If we apply this perspective to higher education and the student experience, it suggests that a student's relationship with higher education is not about its utility (for example being expert in a particular academic subject); but about consumption and signification (wanting to appropriate the economic benefits of a university education and enjoy the cultural capital which comes from being a degree holder). The



expansion of the sector has led to competing discourses on the purpose of higher education, mediated through various media and marketing channels. Higher education is now viewed as another step on life's journey, rather than a privileged experience. For the first year students I interviewed for this research, higher education in their first year was very much about the social experience, the academic experience did not feature as strongly. However, fundamentally the students were experiencing belonging as settling into their new home and creating social networks, therefore it is understandable for this student demographic to privilege this aspect in year one over their academic study.

However, to review the role of social networks and their role in providing a sense of belonging in a true Lacanian sense, I also need to understand what is not being portrayed within the students' accounts of their experiences. Returning to some of the extracts above, we can see the students struggling with the idea of *"being accepted"* and *"to know the right things to say to people"*. In these instances students are struggling with presenting a particular unified image of themselves which will be accepted within the University environment. This image of themselves is potentially different to the image that they present to their family, and their success in presenting a unified identity during this period is likely to impact on their experiences of belonging. Their behaviour in any given context is produced by the symbolic systems which pre-exist the students' entry into the University environment.

Furthermore, from a Lacanian perspective, the presence of the Other is an alienating experience. Where participants spoke of those within the University community who they hold in high regard, such as students in the second and third year, or academic staff, they were projecting their desire on to these people, particularly demonstrated in their talk of concern on how 'to be' in this environment so that they would be accepted. Bannet states

'because it is through identification with another, who appears to enjoy a more complete satisfaction, to be more whole, more perfect or more masterful, that the subject grasps himself as an ego, the other is also someone who can deprive the subject of what he sees as his own (1989, p.16).

Social relationships were also identified as being key to a sense of belongingness by Baumeister and Leary, as reviewed in the second chapter of this thesis. They state

that 'human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships' (1995, p.497) and that this is fundamental to a feeling of belonging. The significance of the personal relationships is arguably demonstrated by the students through their use of terms such as 'family', 'parental', and 'adopted' which are all terms which denote the strength of the relationships they have created. I return here to Dylan who struggled to fit in with her peer group, but found her relationship with her Personal Academic Tutor instrumental in giving her a sense of belonging. Along with this is her wish to do things 'differently' next year and join in with her peers, even though this goes against her natural inclination. This is evidence of Lacan's theory in practice – the Other is both alienating and instrumental in providing a coherent identity in the symbolic order.

Having discussed the students' experiences of belonging, the next section of this chapter provides the students' understanding of community within the context of the University.

#### **5.4 Community**

In addition to developing an understanding of the experience of belonging in my research participants, a secondary research aim was to understand what the notion of community means to undergraduate residential students. During the semi-structured interviews I asked the students whether they felt there was a University community, and if they did, what it meant to them. The following quotations are excerpts from the interview data:

*"There's only as much of a community as you are part of it, I mean if you're not getting involved with as much as possible, or as little as possible, I think you feel less as part of the community than you do if you're part of everything"*  
(Nicole)

*"it's like when you're at home and you're walking around your village or town and you see people you recognise, it's like that here and you walk round and you see people that you've seen before and you feel like it is a community"*  
(Amber)

*“For me it’s about building up my own community with people I know. It is sharing again.” (Daniel)*

*“I think there’s community within communities and it is kind of I dunno you’re never going to know everyone and there is kind of that feeling of being that little fish in what’s going on, who is everyone? What are we doing here? Sort of thing.” (Dylan)*

*“I don’t feel any connection to [campus] at all. It’s like, it’s not a campus like, they call it a campus but it’s buildings, not a community” (Olivia)*

The students did not overtly feel that they were entering into a pre-existing University community. In fact, those who reflected on the notion of community during our interview came to the conclusion that if there was a community, it was something that they had to create themselves and they unanimously felt that community was experienced as recognition and familiarity with others.

Here, community is understood as every day interactions – nothing more profound than this. This understanding of community fits with Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of social capital and its link with an experience of belonging; community is viewed as the relationships and social networks that an individual has made. When I asked about belonging to the wider community as a resident of the city, there was a consensus in the interview data – students viewed themselves as outsiders, and believed they are perceived as ‘different’ to the permanent residents of the city. There were no examples given to suggest that the students had experienced negative behaviour from the residents, but they did not have an intrinsic sense of belonging to the wider community. This I would argue is why their sense of belonging is rooted to the very local – i.e. their room, their friends / networks and the memories and stories which serve to re-inforce their sense of belonging in those spheres. From a Lacanian perspective, this difference to the wider community of the city is instrumental in creating their identity as student – their identity is constructed through what they are not.

The students’ understanding of community is linked to their experience of belonging through their sense of place within the hierarchy of the University. The interviewees spoke of a web of power relations between students in different academic years,

academic staff and support staff and Student Union Sabbatical Officers, all of whom were understood as having the power to bestow a sense of belonging onto students. The students cited a longing for recognition from people who inhabit these positions within the hierarchy of the University. This was then reflected in their understanding of what a community is within the University.

McNay (2005, p.41) states that 'congruence of individual identity with the collective is an important element in community', which reflects the concerns the students raised in the first couple of days about not being sure how to 'be' or how to act. Their experience of belonging as being recognised by others and through the friendship groups / their club and society memberships suggests that community is experienced as congruence of the individual with the collective but on a rather smaller scale than a whole University community. This congruence was largely experienced on a personal level and a collective sense of belonging was not articulated by the students. Students did not articulate belonging 'to' a community in their descriptions of their experiences of belonging.

This suggests that McNay's assertion that: 'it is only senior managers and administrators with cross-institutional functions who have a primary identity with the total organisation' (2005, p.43) holds weight, and certainly resonates with my own experience – I feel that there is a University community. This suggests that any expectation that students would be able to identify with and indeed feel a sense of belonging to a university community is highly unlikely.

However, returning to Relph (1976, p.34) and the students' experience of belonging being understood as the notion of home (and place), we find that he says

'The relationship between community and place is indeed a very powerful one in which each reinforces the identity of the other, and in which the landscape is very much an expression of communally held beliefs and values of interpersonal involvements'.

Returning to Lacan for a moment, it is relevant to consider the participants' beliefs that their sense of community is achieved through their social relationships and recognition of themselves by others. This does appear at odds with Lacan's notion that the presence of the Other is alienating (at the level of the imaginary). Bannet

(1989, p.17) presents an explanation of how this reconciles itself in everyday life 'if men do, nevertheless, manage to live with one another in society, and if subject and ego do, nevertheless, manage to coexist, it is because, in human development, imagination is overlaid by language'. At the level of the symbolic (language) the structuring forces at play give the individual a sense of permanence in the world and language is also reliant on the recognition of others; for without this recognition in language there would be no permanence or fixity within the world. Therefore, the realm of the symbolic is essential to the semblance of a university. The recognition of one student to another is a recognition not just on a social level but the recognition of what a university is at the symbolic level, which explains the concern over how to act and the reverence with which those who hold more senior roles within the University are held.

Eric Santner, using a Lacanian perspective to provide an understanding of how political community can be re-imagined, takes Lacan's divided self as a starting point for conceiving community, he says,

'For the psychoanalytic conception of universality I will be proposing here, it is just the reverse: the possibility of a "We", of communality, is granted on the basis of the fact that every familiar is ultimately strange and that, indeed, I am even in a crucial sense a stranger to myself" (Santner, 2001, p.6).

For Santner, it is the very notion of 'strangeness' which is the 'locus of new possibilities of neighbourliness and community' (ibid., p.6). Rather than viewing the Other as a purely alienating force, Santner brings together the theological notion of revelation with psychoanalytical thought to develop a position whereby being truly open to the Other, whether neighbour or stranger, one can take responsibility for the dilemmas of difference. He describes this as 'the difference between holding ourselves responsible for *knowing* other minds and accepting responsibility for *acknowledging* other minds in all their insistent and uncanny impenetrability' (ibid., p.25).

Santner's work has a fidelity with Nancy's, and in so doing provides a bridge between Lacan's notion of the Other and Nancy's vision of community. Santner's vision for a community, which calls for this openness to the other, is one where

'We are asked to become unbound, so that we might open possibilities for new meaning "beyond" life, such that social, political, and ethical bonds might be refigured not through greater relations of knowledge, but through a redemptive and loving non-relationality—in which the Other is not knowledge but acknowledged' (Murray, 2003, p.164).

This notion of community aligns with Nancy's warning against the oppressive and fatal effects of a totalising community. It acknowledges Lacan's irredeemably divided self, and encourages us to move beyond this, recognising this 'strangeness' in the Other, as described by Murray 'by hearing what is "other" in the Other, and identifying with what alienates the Other from his or her being-in-the-world, from a fictional self, and from historical social and cultural norms that provide the framework of intelligibility' (ibid., p.160). This rejection of the identities proffered to us from symbolically constituted cultures and institutions provides a universality to being and Other, embracing the vulnerability which is the Other in all of us.

Prior to starting this research, I would have argued that there is a University community that we want students to belong to but my research suggests that the extent to which we can hope to achieve this is limited when we consider first year undergraduate residential students. When considering Relph's (1976) belief that 'communally held beliefs and values' are an integral part of a community's relationship to its place, we can see that this is problematic for our heterogeneous group of students, all of whom have started at the University at the same time and are therefore lacking an immediate reference point for this shared understanding, particularly in the case of my own University where second and third year students are not offered the opportunity to return to halls.

However, there was a sense that, on a broader level, there was an expectation that the 'University' would intervene and show care, which could be linked to Heidegger's notion that dwelling has sharing and caring as essential elements. The expectation was put forward that University staff would 'check-up' on students within their residential halls, and surprise that no one had been to visit.

*"I just like, to be involved like, like checking up on you almost...they've not been to check and we've had nothing. There's no communication like, no one*

*checks up on you. I'm not saying that I'd like that but you know what I mean (laughs). You kind of expect it" (Olivia).*

Frustration was also aired over the apparent lack of response in resolving issues within their accommodation. Cameron felt that there was a lack of care from the University over issues he had with his radiator *"I've asked about it 3 times and now I've just given up"*, Amber experienced ongoing problems with her heating and water, but despite this being a negative experience, it had also helped to build a sense of camaraderie with her fellow residents: *"we've all been able to sit there and just go we're all in the same boat"*. These incidents, although they did not detract from the students' experiences of belonging, have influenced the students' perception of the University as being 'uncaring', which could, in turn, have influenced their understanding of whether there is a University community.

If I now return to chapter two and Nancy's (1991) notion of community, I feel that the understanding of community presented through the students' interviews were similar to the notion of community put forward by Nancy: that people are unable to form a unified community but instead they are in community through sharing of themselves. Nancy speaks of people being-in community; 'community means, consequently, that there is no singular being without another singular being' (1991, p.28). As such the students should recognise that they always already are in community. This does clash somewhat with Heidegger's notion that dwelling is proceeded by a prior identity but I would argue that community in the University context, due to its transient nature, resonates more with Nancy's conception of community, when related to the student experience. Equally as important, Nancy argues that we cannot see the formation of community as a project and so University staff should not see as their project the activity of forming a community.

As the experience of belonging was largely focused on the non-academic side of University, the intangibles, it is also difficult to identify a common purpose that would unify students into a community, if they identify as student (which could be defined for example as "A person who is studying at a university or other place of higher education" (n.d.; Oxford Dictionaries online)) is not explicitly linked to the way that they experience belonging. Trying to impose a community onto them would be problematic and very likely challenge their feelings of belonging.

Nancy argues that reducing humans to a function of their work (as producer), (or in the case of my thesis, reducing people to the function of student) would mean true collective working in unity. However, the reality of being human is that everyone is different, and it is impossible to work in unity as it goes against the nature of being human. What is achieved, however, is *compearance*, which is defined as people sharing of themselves. Nancy describes this phenomenon in relation to community as follows, “community” is in fact nothing other than a consumption of the social fabric – but a consumption that occurs in this bond and in accordance with the sharing of the finitude of singular beings’ (Nancy, 1991, p.37). Sharing here is understood as sharing in the form of participation in society, a participation which erupts spontaneously in the moment of a social event.

Students narrated their experiences of belonging to me as occurring at an existential level – as being experienced as ‘home’, ‘family’ and ‘shared stories and memories’. Although for some of the students these experiences came easily, for the majority there was a painful, alienating element in their journey to belonging.

## 5.5 Summary

The experience of belonging, I think, is best described as ‘inhabiting’. Whether this is inhabiting your room, inhabiting your sports club or society or inhabiting the stories and memories that you have created with your friends – the term inhabit links the themes I have identified together. When I looked for a definition of this word, I was surprised to find that I was returned to Heidegger’s notion of dwelling, as the origin of the word inhabit is described as follows:

‘Late Middle English inhabite, enhabite, from Old French enhabiter or Latin inhabitare, from in- ‘in’ + habitare ‘dwell’

(n.d.<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/inhabit>)

Contrary to Heidegger’s notion of dwelling, the notion of ‘sharing’ was not obvious from the interviews with my participants. Although some of the students had created pseudo-family set-ups within their residences and seemed to show great concern for each other, this was by no means widespread and it certainly did not extend beyond the boundaries of the individual networks they had set up or into a broader University community.



With regard to chapter three and the discussion of the neo-liberal and belonging, I feel that the understanding of belonging which was generally focused on a student's own space, their immediate friends / society and not necessarily on their academic life is in part due to a neo-liberal perspective. The marketing fanfare which engages students prior to their enrolment at university sells the notion that university is fun, interesting, provides a great social life and opportunities. Furthermore, from the Lacanian perspective these notions set up the elusive surplus which drives the students' desires. Within the walls of the university, teaching and learning privileges rationality and academic technique but the first year residential students of my study had privileged the non-academic side of life. Indeed, their sense of belonging was predominantly experienced in ways which are more fundamental to the notion of 'being' rather than 'being a student'.

The data generated by the participants also aligns with poststructuralist theory: that identity is not fixed but precarious and reliant on the Other. And with this is the sense of belonging experienced by the students. The overarching umbrella which links the themes drawn from the data – stories, memories, home and social networks, are all reliant to some degree on the Other to experience a sense of belonging. This is echoed by Bannet (1989, p.22) who states 'the subject's desire may be alienated in the other, but it also realised in the other, by the other and through the other'. Students' sense of belonging is experienced most positively where they have managed to become a student and all that it entails in the symbolic order most effectively, where a subject is 'constituted as an effect within discourse through a particular stitching together or suturing of imaginary and symbolic' (Easthope, 1991, p.42).

Lacan's Other also provides a helpful lens through which to view the notion of belonging. For students, there was an Other to which they looked in order to understand whether or not they belonged. This was described as the second and third year students, the media portrayals of the student experience or the stories and memories which were reflected back to them. The gaze of the Other, the recognition by an Other, is represented in the students' desire to be recognised by others, giving them a sense of a fixed identity within this community and their understanding of community was largely based on the recognition and familiarity of others. As the subject's reality is experienced externally to themselves (in the image) and through

the recognition of an Other, the Lacanian theoretical position lends itself well to providing an understanding of how belonging is experienced by students within a university community.

However, this recognition by the Other is a mis-recognition – the complete (mis) identification of the self with an image is a misrecognition and makes one forever reliant and vulnerable to the recognition of the Other. Whereas belonging can be experienced through the creation of stories, memories, social relationships and a sense of home, it can also lead to an alienating experience for those who struggle to engage with these relationships and this can lead to a sense of frustration towards the University for their perceived lack of care towards them.

The myriad ways in which students articulated their experiences of a sense of belonging has led me to a point where I have not been able to provide a single description of how a sense of belonging is experienced by undergraduate residential students, or indeed a definite sense of a community. This conclusion would support a Lacanian perspective that the notion of belonging and community from a student perspective is nothing more than a fabrication – it does not exist in a particular place where it can be accessed and defined, it is a concept which exists in the realm of the symbolic. The desire to create a community for students to belong to comes from the staff members' self-perceptions that there is a University community to belong to and our practices are an attempt to project this understanding onto our students. The lack of a definite definition is resonant of Lacan's 'lack' – and my desire to find a definition as a practitioner is what has driven this thesis and what drives the actions of the participants in my research to find a sense of belonging within the University context.

In the next chapter I bring together the students' voices into a phenomenological description of belonging, relate the themes discussed in this chapter to the professional practice of student support, and provide a reflection on the research process.

## **Chapter 6: Implications for Student Support**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The final chapter of this thesis summarises my findings and provides an opportunity to reflect on the research process. As the Introduction to this thesis makes clear, I am a practitioner first and foremost and very concerned with understanding the experiences of the students whom I serve. With this in mind, I include here a summary of the contribution this thesis makes to theory and practice, as well as presenting some ideas on opportunities for future research. Finally, I offer a reflective account outlining the experience I have had in creating this thesis.

### **6.2 Addressing the research aims**

By adopting a poststructuralist framework and using a Lacanian perspective on my data, I have been able to provide an understanding of the ways that students experience a sense of belonging and community. The adopted phenomenological approach has enabled me to produce a description of the student experience of belonging, a description which demonstrates that the lived experience of belonging is quite independent from the corporate strategies mobilised by the University to 'manage' the student experience. Furthermore, the experience of 'community' is largely absent from the students' narratives. This finding supports my position that the notion of 'a sense of belonging to a university community' is largely the effect of a fantasy, which is produced by the external factors of the neo-liberal environment. Our student support practices are driven by our own socially constituted desires, which are in turn driven by our wish to be recognised by the Other as a coherent professional self.

Whilst utilising a phenomenological approach has enabled me to produce a unitary description of the phenomena, using a poststructuralist lens has revealed the discontinuities inherent in any seemingly coherent understanding of the world. In this way, both phenomenology and poststructuralism have been engaged to provide a full response to my research questions, as described by Stoller 'both phenomenology and poststructuralism contribute to the critical re-examination of experience' (2009, p.729). In combining these approaches one is able to critically examine experience both from the perspective of concrete subjects and through the effects produced by discourse. In particular, a poststructural analysis of the data has

revealed that our student support practices are based on 'taken for granted' beliefs about what will enable students to belong within higher education and what a community 'is' within this environment. Utilising Lacan's psychoanalytical approach has enabled me to highlight how, when it comes to the notion of belonging, the three registers of the psyche create a situation where the alienated self has to put in effort in order to create a sense of belonging within their environment.

I start this section with a phenomenological description of belonging as experienced by the undergraduate residential students of my study. This description is inevitably a pastiche of the students' voices, but it aims to capture the essence of their experiences; I have brought all of their understandings together into one narrative. This pastiche fits with a poststructural explication of human experience as it brings together the multiple voices involved in this thesis, without privileging any single one. It draws out the contingent nature of experience, highlighting the instability in their understanding of 'belonging and community', demonstrating that the students are active participants in their experiences, experiences which are always already interpreted. This pastiche has provided the foundation for a poststructural analysis. The plausibility of this description will be judged by those who have had the experience of being a residential undergraduate student themselves and the resonance of my description with their own experiences.

*Arriving at University for the first time is an exciting but daunting time. I am really looking forward to experiencing the best days of my life! But first I need to find a way of fitting in. I actively make the effort to make friends with people on my floor. And this does require effort at times, as they are not always the 'types' of people I would choose to be friends with. There are unnerving moments where I realise that the self/other relationships which worked so easily for me at home are absent here. I need to work hard to fix an identity for myself in this new place, to stitch myself into the fabric of University life and to ensure that I am visible to others; the possibility of being or becoming invisible is ever present in the first weeks and months. Because of this, I take comfort from the relationships that I have made; to have met people who now know me in this new place helps to give me roots here.*

*But this doesn't stop me missing home; sometimes the feeling of homesickness is so strong that it shakes my very foundations. I put every effort into making my room feel like home, dressing it with family photos and other posters and souvenirs which outwardly demonstrate to others who I am. I actively seek out and enjoy activities which go some way to fulfil my need to be who I want to be; joining the hockey society and involving myself with their traditions which make me feel like I belong to something which existed even before I did, strengthening my feelings of belonging to this place. But still I feel that there is something missing, that I am not quite able to fully access the student experience which I was expecting to encounter. I look at others in the second and third year and sometimes feel that they seem to be enjoying a more complete experience than me, it means a lot when they acknowledge me or take the time to stop and talk.*

*Sometimes I wonder about my academic work. I mean, it is why I'm here after all. But no one has really bothered to find out why I've been missing lectures. But my personal academic tutor is great. She has shown concern for me on a few occasions. If it wasn't for her showing an interest in me I'm not sure that I would have stayed here.*

*Back in my halls we have fun. We gather most nights in the corridor to talk about the day and the stupid things we've done – to have a laugh all together. It's a space which is ours and which brings us together. We repeat the same old stories about the things we've done, but we don't get bored with them. We start to feel like a family and this brings us closer, sharing activities like cooking for each other and celebrating our birthdays.*

*But the University is big and I'm not that familiar with all of it. I've found my own routes through the place and recognise landmarks and people along the way which is good, but it's my corridor and my friends where I feel I belong. And even then the feeling is transient; it can just as quickly become a 'not belonging' feeling. I start calling this place home and this makes me feel a pang of guilt about my real family and home, but the act of calling University home also makes me realise that I can, with effort, belong here.*

This description captures the themes drawn from the participant data. Conspicuous in its absence is the voice of Dylan, who gave an account which was at odds with the other participants; largely feeling as though she did not belong at University. The voices represented in this pastiche suggest that students experience a sense of belonging through their constructed experiences of family and home and through, from a Lacanian perspective, the recognition of the Other. These experiences of belonging suggest that it is a phenomenon which is largely outside of university interventions. Yet, despite this, it is a culturally accepted practice that we will continue to develop and implement projects which aim to engender a sense of belonging. These interventions provide a fabrication of what the student experience is, displacing the 'real' and authentic experiences with something else – the idea that a student should belong to a university community.

These practices are symptomatic of the world that we live in and I do not intend to be critical of the interventions which are implemented by student support practitioners. If I return to Baudrillard's (1983) work at this point, where the argument is that authentic experiences have been displaced by simulations of the real, we can see that higher education is guilty of these very same practices. Baudrillard uses the examples of Las Vegas, where we are provided with an experience which displaces the authentic, which is culturally accepted but not 'real'. As student support practitioners we perpetuate this fabrication of the student experience, which includes the notion of belonging to a university community, and the next section considers this performance from a Lacanian perspective.

### **6.3 Lacan and the practitioner**

Turning to Lacan first, to understand how the professional role is constructed, we find an explanation in the Mirror stage, which is where the subject identifies with the Other, and constructs their identity within this relational identification. This process creates a lack, and produces a desire for fulfilment. This results in our continued efforts to provide a coherent sense of self through our engagement with the symbolic order. My desire to impose a structure and exert a level of control in my professional area is, from a Lacanian perspective, reflective of my desire to guarantee my identity as a competent manager within the University.

I feel the work on organisational culture by Roberts (2005, p.630) explains my desire, as a manager, to understand the student experience of belonging, as follows:

‘the fantasy here is of an external world that moves as I will it to move populated by automaton, or people who through the black arts of administrative skill have been reduced to the status of pliant and predictable objects. Plans, strategies, information systems, others’ conformity all promise, if not deliver, a sense of mastery that is perhaps first glimpsed in the responsiveness of the mirror image’

In relating this to the role of student support practitioner, I return to chapter three and the discussion on league tables and retention which I argue has led to our recent emphasis on creating a sense of belonging to a university community. As university practitioners there is a pressure to look externally at the factors which give us validation such as the National Student Survey results and other league table measures, including our success in retaining students. The neo-liberal push towards individuality and empowering the consumer in a competitive marketplace is, arguably, at odds with traditional notions of student support which are rooted in the Oxbridge model where the personal tutor’s role was to act as the moral compass *in loco parentis* (Thomas and Hixenbaugh, 2006). The influence of neo-liberalism is seen through the focus on measures and performativity, and ‘within a framework of judgement within which what ‘improvement’ and effectiveness are, is determined for us, and ‘indicated’ of us by measures of quality and productivity’ (Ball, 2012, p.31).

I argue that, in a neo-liberal environment where the focus is on the individual, the concept of belonging to a university community has an inherent paradox within it. Students are at university in order to work independently to gain their degree qualification. Our student support interventions are required when this paradox is revealed, when students realise that they do not belong to the university community. Yet, escaping this paradox is problematic. It is driven by the marketing strategies which are inherent in the current higher education marketplace, which suggest that an amazing student experience is accessible to all and forms part of the product which is being purchased. However, the idea of an exciting student experience, and belonging to a university community are façades, borne out of the marketization of higher education. Not all students will see themselves reflected in the mass-

produced 'ideal' student experience and this is where difficulties can arise, as in the case of Dylan, where experiences of belonging and community were beyond her grasp. In an ongoing cycle, this paradoxical situation calls student support practitioners to action, and further interventions are developed to mask this lack and meet our performance measures.

From a Lacanian perspective, we construct our identity through the mirror which is held up to us via these external performance measures. This creates in us a desire which we seek to fulfil by engaging with these performance measures and bettering ourselves in the competitive market. We are pulled towards the imaginary when we are called to action through the Corporate Plans, Business Plans, government funded research (to give just a few examples) which tell us to ensure that our students experience a sense of belonging. This is where the process moves from the mirror stage to the imaginary – the notion of belonging has been articulated and has entered the symbolic order. Our ideal is to have a student body who feel that they belong to a university community and who therefore remain at university until the conclusion of their programme. However, we know that there is a fragility here (a lack to use the Lacanian term) which manifests itself through those students who have made the wrong choices in deciding to come to university, or have other negative factors impacting on their experience. This puts a pressure on student support practitioners to implement interventions which mask this lack.

It is imagined that our interventions will meet our desire to fill the gap (of our league table status; improve our retention rate) and we therefore develop projects, look for examples of best practice from elsewhere and implement new measures. We believe that our interventions will have the desired effect, which is to create a sense of belonging to a university community / climb the league tables. We do it in the knowledge that there is always something which is lacking. But we continue with our endeavours as they are important in the creation and maintenance of our identity in the symbolic order, and signifiers such as league tables, as long as they exist, will create this desire within us. Reflecting back to Baudrillard, the 'real' experience of being a university student has been displaced by media representations, along with other influencing factors, of what being a student is like. The successful appropriation of this representation will result in students and practitioners believing that there is a university community to belong to.



Whilst this thesis is specifically focused on experiences of the notions of belonging and community in higher education, it is relevant to point out here that the practice of creating the façade of community and belonging is not particular to higher education and this thesis should not be read as a criticism of the approaches taken by universities. Indeed, many commercial enterprises develop brands which try to engender and relate a sense of community and belonging to their products and services.

In considering the practitioner's role in promoting practices which are arguably ineffective, it is relevant to draw on Stronach et al. (2002, p.109) who talk of the dilemmas facing a professional – namely the competing notions of “economy of performance” (manifestations broadly of the audit culture) and various “ecologies of practice” (professional dispositions and commitments individually and collectively engendered)’. Although Stronach et al. specifically focus their research findings on nursing and teaching professionals, there are clear parallels with the work of student support staff; particularly those working in the area of pastoral support which is my primary focus. Their notion of ‘outside-in’ professionalism, where politics and other external drivers play the influencing role in the *modus operandi* of the professional, describes the situation I have outlined within this thesis: external influences have brought ‘a sense of belonging’ into the higher education discourses, which have enforced on student support practitioners a requirement to ‘do something about it’ – furthermore, something which is measurable. The ‘economy of performance’ is seen in, for example, the retention statistics for the University, which are published in national league tables, and are a key indicator for the performance of the University.

Creating a sense of belonging in students is driven through this ‘economy of performance’ and leads to the creation of ecologies of practice (for example, the development of opt-out peer mentoring schemes) which aim to fulfil the requirements of an audit culture. Furthermore, my own desire to investigate the notion of belonging is furthering the ecology of practice. However, this analysis has revealed the series of tensions and paradoxes in University strategy, against the lived experiences of belonging, highlighting the contradiction between what students want and the interventions we offer. Corporate strategies are at odds with student experiences which are characterised through the themes I have identified. There is an irony in the interview data whereby the University was mentioned more frequently as challenging

a sense of belonging (e.g. by not 'checking up' on students who are not attending, or by imposing punishments in student accommodation), rather than engendering it, except for situations where members of staff were shown to demonstrate acts of kindness to students. This situation highlights the University's misunderstanding of the way that belonging is experienced, which renders corporate policy and strategy in this area weak. Conspicuous in its absence in the interview data was any mention of the student support interventions we offer with the aim of engendering a sense of belonging and community within students.

In the next section I will look at each of the themes analysed in the Discussion chapter and discuss their implications for practice.

#### **6.4 Implications for practice**

As a study which utilises a phenomenological approach and which is situated in practice, it is important that there is a transformative element to my research, as advocated by van Manen (2007). My interpretation of the research participants' experiences is valuable to my professional role and recommendations can be formed from it. Despite my critical conclusions about higher education notions of 'belonging to a university community', reflection on the interpretations I have made of the participants' data have enabled me to provide recommendations which centre on the notion of belonging (rather than belonging to a university community, which I argue we should not concern ourselves with).

Participant interviews demonstrated that belongingness is experienced on a continuum. Some students had more successfully experienced a sense of belonging than others. Daniel for example, through his engagement with the hockey team, had managed to develop a strong sense of belonging, whereas Dylan and Olivia had struggled somewhat to achieve this during their first year. Their struggle to achieve a sense of belonging impacted on their wellbeing, with both students discussing their experiences with a more negative slant than those who had not had the same struggle. This reflects the literature reviewed in chapter two which found a sense of belonging to be fundamental to wellbeing. It also fits with the poststructuralist perspective that maintaining a coherent sense of self is a project, and a sense of belonging within the University setting is inextricably linked to this.

Evidence from the participant interviews has suggested that students' experiences of belonging are based largely on the unstructured elements of student life, as outlined in the themes of place; stories, memories and rituals; and social networks. Despite this there was also clear evidence of the value placed on the structured elements of University life such as personal tutors and student support staff. Although my sample size is small and not intended to be generalisable, it is interesting to note that no participant referred to the University's student support interventions or projects in their experiences of belonging. This highlights to me that our corporate push to encourage students to belong to a university community is largely erroneous, borne through the neo-liberal influence on higher education. In the following sections I take each of the themes revealed through participant interviews and consider them in the context of student support practice.

#### **6.4.1 Place and home**

If we first look at the theme of 'place', it is not surprising, with hindsight, that this notion has such a strong influence on the students' experiences of a sense of belonging as all of the research participants had moved away from home. The extent to which students attached a sense of belonging to a place in the University which could give them, to use Relph's (1976) terminology, a sense of 'empathetic insideness', was of great importance to them. This sense of belonging to place was intrinsically linked to the memories, stories and rituals which were created in this place and, also, from a poststructuralist perspective, place gave students the opportunity to inhabit the subject position of student in such a way that they experienced a sense of belonging. Reflecting this back to Heidegger in the previous chapter, being and place are inseparable, the embodied self being inseparable from a place and experience.

All of the themes identified suggest that belonging is mediated through shared experiences rather than experienced on a purely individual level. Furthermore, the special role of the corridor, highlighted by the student participants, raises questions about the lack of communal space in newer residential buildings, where communal space is often removed to meet the preference for self-contained studio flats. From a Lacanian perspective this practice reduces the opportunity for a symbolic space where the Other can play a part in reinforcing the formation of a student identity.

The fact that place held such value for the student participants, particularly the role of the halls of residence in this, suggests an opportunity to review the governance and design of university residences. I suggest that we need to ensure that, on an ontological level, Heidegger's principles of dwelling and sharing are taken note of, and that practices which do not promote this are debated in the context of these notions. If belonging is fundamentally linked to human efficacy as suggested in the literature reviewed in the second chapter, then there is a case for supporting the notion of 'home' within university owned accommodation as the students' experiences of belonging were entwined with the notion of home. This is a complex task, but it is one which would give direction to the managers of these areas and would afford the opportunity for students to have a meaningful relationship with the place in which they live.

From a Lacanian perspective, the links between place and the construction of student identity are clear from the Discussion chapter. Indeed, Cresswell (2002) argues that place offers the opportunity for performance. He argues, 'place is the raw material for the creative production of identity rather than an *a-priori* label or identity' (p.25). Again, this emphasises the need for quality communal spaces where students can build their student identity as it serves as an opportunity for the performativity of self as student; for the inter-subjectivity of multiple selves who can act out their desire for recognition in the Other. This recognition of each other as student, in the residential setting, is understood by the students as being key in experiencing a sense of belonging. From a Lacanian perspective it gives students the opportunity to put in the work that is necessary to maintain the mis-recognition that they are a unified being. The interactions which occur in this place are the opportunity for belonging to be bestowed by an Other.

As student support practitioners we should be mindful of the special role the university home plays for students; something which I feel can be forgotten at times. Offering quality spaces other than the Students' Union bar after the usual 9am – 5pm hustle and bustle of university day time has finished would counterbalance the lack of communal space in halls of residence. This would limit the need to congregate in corridors, which although important in the experiences shared by my participants, was clearly also a bone of contention for others when they were trying to concentrate on completing academic work in their rooms.

#### 6.4.2 Social networks

The second and very much overlapping theme that I will consider here is the role of social networks. The theme is overlapping because many of the social networks which led to an experience of belonging occurred within the halls of residence. A sense of belonging was also experienced through the relationships students had with their tutors and University support staff.

The students who were not as successful in building their social networks early on put an element of 'blame' on the University for their perceived lack of a sense of belonging, such as Olivia who was disappointed that no one had informed her about the activities going on at the University which she might have been interested in:

*"I kind of feel in the sense that I'm musical but there was no kind of pointing in the direction, I don't know what they could do but like all the stuff apparently there's loads of stuff, I only found out by talking to my friend the other day...there's no communication like, no one checks up on you. I'm not saying that I'd like that but you know what I mean (laughs) (Olivia).*

This challenges the notion of student as consumer, inhabiting centre stage within the university environment and instead draws out the vulnerable and contingent nature of belonging within this unique context. Furthermore, the notion of student belonging suggests that the opposite is also the case, that 'not belonging' is a possibility.

Students who choose to immerse themselves in student life, to inhabit this role by making it home, and who create social networks which can be reinforced through the formation of memories and stories are able to engender a sense of belonging, and survive within the social space which is the university experience.

This challenges my previous point that a sense of belonging was experienced outside of our proactive interventions, with Olivia hoping for or expecting a "checking up" service. From a student support perspective, this suggests that our services need to be visible to students in their 'home'. It is also important that we provide easy access to all of the diverse opportunities available to students to enhance the possibility of them easily finding something which enables them to feel a sense of belonging whilst at university. This recognises the notion that individuals experience the world within the constraints of the values, beliefs and meanings they have adopted through the course of their lives. At university, achieving a sense of

belonging is supported when students can experience something which they recognise and which supports their subject position (be it music taste, sport, or whatever else they have chosen to value). This then affords the opportunity to develop social networks.

Providing 'managed' opportunities to develop social networks is reflected in many universities by the move to change their peer mentoring schemes into an 'opt-out' rather than 'opt in' structure (as, in my own experience, those who are the targets for these schemes rarely opt-in). This is moving to an enforced volunteerism, as described by Bigge (2006), when talking of the perceived need to join social networking sites for fear of missing out on, or not existing within the online community. For our peer mentoring schemes, it is a fear of missing out at the start of their university experience (or even pre-entry) which has the effect of persuading students to join. My research would suggest that there is value in this practice, as social networks provide the Other which Lacan would argue is key to students maintaining their identity. For new students in a new environment this is especially important. We cannot expect that lasting friendships will form through mentoring schemes, but we can hope that knowledgeable student peers will provide that initial opportunity for new students to find out about the activities which may interest them. Additionally, the student participants raised the reverence in which they hold the 'older' students and their associated wish to be accepted by them, and it is in this context that the potential value in well trained mentors, for promoting a sense of belonging, can be realised.

For me, the most interesting student in this study has been Dylan, for although she continued at University (rather than leaving) she certainly had not had the same experiences of belonging as the other participants, and her decision to return for a second attempt of her first year, *"so next year I'm aware of what not to do you know"* demonstrates that there is a culturally accepted student subject position which needs to be inhabited in order to experience a sense of belonging. Dylan accepted that she needed to engage socially with other students to achieve a sense of belonging; having to 'buy-in' to the culturally accepted student experience, even though this would be an act which created a tension within her.

As student support practitioners we need to ensure that we give students comprehensive information about the varied activities available at university, and that

we give timely reminders of this information. Having the opportunity to 'find people like them' is key to a sense of belonging for students. This resonates with Nancy's work on community; instead of imposing a suffocating model of community on our students, we need to ensure that they are empowered to find their own sense of belonging in a place, and that they engender 'an openness to the alterity, the uncanny strangeness, of the other' (Santner, 2001, p.5).

#### **6.4.3 Stories, memories and rituals**

Again, I would argue that this theme overlaps heavily with 'place' and 'social networks'. Many of the stories and memories were focused within the students' halls of residences. Because of the time spent together in the residences, it is, again with hindsight, clear that this theme would come through for my research participants. However, I must admit that this is not something I had ever previously contemplated as a practitioner. I suspect that this theme is unique to residential students.

From the student support practitioner perspective, I think consideration should be given to the opportunities afforded to students to reflect on their university experiences. Opportunities to write blogs and share photos about their experiences by using Instagram, for example, are illustrations of the ways that memories can be immortalised for the students.

The opportunity for 'ritual' is limited within day-to-day student life. The main University ritual is the graduation ceremony which does not take place until the end of the academic experience. However, on a smaller scale, students had developed their own practices which gave them a sense of structure and belonging within the University. This manifested itself through the sports society 'rituals' and in the practices which students described, such as making 'family' meals together. These practices gave a focus and meaning to daily life, and reflected the small-scale sense of community they spoke of, operating within the constraints of those they recognise. Again, these are independent of university intervention, but a useful insight nonetheless into the experiences which students feel enable them to feel a sense of belonging.

These insights must be balanced against the understanding that student support practitioners should not be tempted to intervene in every area of student residential life. Our role should be to facilitate, rather than over-manage, and the insight I have

gained into student experiences of belonging through this research makes me reluctant to suggest that further interventions are necessary.

#### **6.4.4 Community**

The ideas presented by Nancy (1991) on community are very transferable to the practical understanding of what community can mean in a university environment. The pressure on universities to climb league tables and achieve high returns on the National Student Survey risks conceptualising students in a very particular way which reduces them to a functional role within the university environment. Creating a sense of belonging in students is arguably part of this rhetoric.

My research has highlighted to me, and I hope that it will to others, the importance of seeing students as 'more' than the sum of their academic experience. Our undergraduate residential students are trying to make our campuses their home, build up their social experiences and networks and create stories and memories which they hope will serve them well into their old age as a form of nostalgia. Belonging is experienced at the level of the existential and strategies to enhance belonging which are frequently suggested in the literature on retention, such as giving students branded hoodies, are scratching the surface when it comes to how students actually experience a sense of belonging.

University staff should reflect on their interactions with students, and understand themselves as being part of a web of communication with students. During my interviews there were reassuring anecdotes about both academic staff and support staff, and how their kindness and concern had helped the student to experience a sense of belonging. Conversely, there were also comments about the lack of help and support available with issues in their accommodation (understood as their home) and how this had negatively impacted on them.

Nancy's argument, that we should not try to control a community, does not mean however that we should not adopt an ethical code, or have guiding values. Based on the research I have carried out for this study, I would argue that making students feel welcome would be a better place to start from. It has less of the 'unifying' nature that so concerns Nancy and suggests an open approach rather than a closed approach, leaving community to happen without control and intervention. This approach also echoes Santner's vision for a community where the strangeness of the Other is



displaced to become an acknowledgement of Otherness, moving away from the negative effects produced by understanding a community through what you are not. Student understandings of belonging were rooted in their localised experiences, and concepts of a 'whole university community' were not relevant to them.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

From a poststructuralist perspective, those students who 'belonged' were those who most successfully subscribed to the expected practices of being a student, such as engaging with clubs and societies, making friends with peers and successfully making the transition from home to University. Dylan and Olivia, both of whom struggled to gain a sense of belonging, did not successfully engage with the 'expected' practices. Perhaps most surprisingly it was their programmes of study which kept them on course. How often do we encourage students to feel a sense of belonging through their love of learning or for their subject area? The dominant discourses are about the 'student experience' which seem to have focussed in more recent years on employability and the social aspects of student life, rather than privileging the academic sphere.

It is interesting to note that student experiences of belonging centred largely on the non-academic elements of student life – place and home, stories and rituals, and social networks. This I would argue is to be entirely expected, especially during the first year. A need to belong will be most easily met in the familiar and recognisable. When students enter the University environment they are entering an institution which has a very particular symbolic culture. Retreating to notions of family and home and seeking comfort in shared experiences through the repetition of stories and valuing new memories is entirely understandable. The desire to continue with an identity which is familiar, whilst at the same time desiring to inhabit the idea of a student is the journey to belonging experienced by the research participants for this thesis. This is articulated in the experiences shared with me, where a disruption to this process is experienced, or a longing has not been realised.

From a Lacanian perspective, the students, the staff and the University are always in a state of incompleteness – our mutual identities are necessarily formed and re-formed in the Other. From the perspective of community, we are best served here by Nancy's theory, which positions us 'always already' in community. This is a notion

which was echoed by the students, who did not define 'community' in their interviews as anything other than familiarity and recognition. I argue this suggests that community is always already there – we do not need to force the creation of a community.

I have highlighted in this chapter that the corporate push to enhance student belonging to a university community is flawed, and the result of a pervasive neo-liberal influence. This has rendered the notion of community in this context largely fictive and this is emphasised through the data obtained from the interviewees; their experiences of belonging and community were independent from manufactured university interventions, indeed the notion of community did not seem to have entered their minds until I raised it.

Despite this critical look at higher education practice, the findings from this thesis, from a phenomenological perspective, have I hope, provided a fuller understanding of the ways in which belonging and community are experienced by undergraduate residential students. As student support practitioners we can use the themes from this research as a framework to direct discussions with those students who access our services because they feel that they do not belong at university; and as a guide for where we might best direct our future efforts.

### **6.5.1 Limitations and opportunities for future research**

My research is based on a small sample of students, on one university campus – clearly this brings with it limitations when it comes to the generalisability of the findings. As my participants self-selected it is of course possible that certain voices will have gone unheard.

This research was a purposeful attempt to understand how belonging is understood by first year residential students – those who I feel are often assumed to be the norm and therefore not prioritised in the research field when it comes to understanding their experiences. I feel that I have established a phenomenological understanding of belonging as it is experienced by this student group, however it would now be interesting to extend this research into other university environments to understand whether, for example, belonging is experienced in the same way at a Russell Group institution, or to investigate how international students understand the notion of home

in the university context. It would also be worthwhile establishing how a sense of belonging is experienced by non-residential students.

This research was not intended to offer a generalisable account of the experience of belonging in higher education by undergraduate residential students; however I do not feel that this detracts from the research in any way. Rather it provides an understanding which can be used as a spring-board to further investigate this notion in other institutions and with different student cohorts.

### **6.5.2 Reflections on my research experience**

Towards the end of writing this thesis I read a piece of writing by Pelias (2013) which really resonated with me and my experience of bringing this thesis into being. In it he talks of the clarifying function of writing, he states that ‘writers come to realize what they believe in the process of writing, in the act of finding the language that crystallizes their thoughts and sentiments’ (p.549). The close relationship the researcher develops with their data, with its analysis and finally with its bringing into being through the process of writing has been a transformational process of coming to experience new realisations about the area I am studying. Pelias describes this as a process of “writing into” rather than “writing up” a subject’ (ibid., p.549).

This process has enabled me to come to the realisation that, as an individual with a vested interest in the outcomes of this research and insider status, I also had particular attitudes which have influenced this research, particularly those outlined in chapter two, which I have been reflecting on from a professional stance and which I now hold truer than I did when starting out with this research. These attitudes have challenged me in a professional sense. As an insider who may have accorded more benefit to stating that student services should have a role in the notion of ‘belonging to a community’, I now feel that our perceived role is a necessary side effect of a market driven and therapeutic ethos: a realisation which does not enable me to disentangle myself from our practices, but does give me the understanding to challenge and better inform my own practice.

The following extract, from the perspective of a teacher-researcher, describes the transformative process that writing this thesis has been for me, and how it may be interpreted by others:

‘In short, in describing my classroom, I affect the way I see it, thus the way I act in it, the way I am and hence the way I subsequently describe it (since it has also been changed by my actions). In engaging in this circular hermeneutic process, teacher-researchers pass through a sequence of perspectives, each capable of generating various types of writing and each susceptible to a variety of later interpretations. However, this writing becomes detached from the person who generated it. It becomes a historical artefact susceptible to multiple interpretations as to its origins and its situation within the social sphere through which it emerged’ (Brown & Jones, 2001, p.8).

I can relate the transformational experience of writing this thesis back to Lacan, where he states: ‘what is realized in my history is neither the past definite of what was, since it is no more, nor even the present perfect as what has been in what I am, but the future anterior as what I will have been for what I am in the process of becoming’ ([1966]/2006, p.300). The process of researching and writing for this thesis has been a process of re-writing my self; moments of significance within my career and within the data have taken on new meanings, as my perspective on my professional self has changed or been reinterpreted during this process. This process has also led me to question whether the title of this section should be ‘Conclusion’, recognising that there will be no ‘final’ thoughts on this research project, there are just the thoughts that I have now, which from a Lacanian position will always be re-written and re-understood by future selves, there being no fundamental self from which I can make concrete assertions.

The process of interviewing the students revealed a different side to the University for me. This is a side which I could experience from a position of University Administrator, some of my findings troubled me, disrupted my ‘taken for granted’ assumptions and my reading further granted me a whole new perspective on my work area. This is not an unexpected experience given the poststructuralist approach I have taken. A Lacanian perspective on myself as practitioner, which would mean that I can only ever view myself incompletely, has enabled me to question the image of myself as practitioner and researcher. Throughout the last six years of the EdD programme I can identify changes in the way I position my role in the different assessments I have produced for this programme. Lacan would say that my analysis of myself would never reveal to me the ‘real’ reasons for presenting myself in such a

way, but regardless the EdD has provided me with the valuable opportunity to stand back, and to try to understand why we do what we do in practice, and to understand the context I am part of more deeply. This has benefited me on a personal level, as professionally I still need to 'play the game', but now I have more analytical tools at my disposal which enable me more confidently, and in the 'appropriate' contexts, to question some of the 'taken for granted' aspects of my work area.

So how do I view myself and my professional role now? I wonder whether my changing views throughout the course of the EdD were in part a desire to appropriate the identity of an academic. The desired achievement of an EdD qualification, I fantasise, will enable me to appear in a particular way under the gaze of the University. Whitchurch (2008, p.394) talks of the increasingly blurred boundaries within university administration and management roles, and the process of writing this thesis has helped me to step into the 'third space' where she describes, 'new forms of blended professional are emerging, with mixed backgrounds and portfolios, dedicated to progressing activity comprising elements of both professional and academic domains'. I feel, as a developing researcher, that I have added a range of tools and techniques to my own portfolio which have given me the confidence to shift my identity from University support staff member to blended professional, and I am now keen to continue my journey into the third space.

## References

- Altheide, D. L., & Johnson, J. M. (2013). Reflections on Interpretive Adequacy in Qualitative Research. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (4th Edition ed., pp. 381-412). London: Sage.
- AMOSSHE. (2013a, April 17). *Discussion paper: 'Are Students Customers?'*. Retrieved July 14, 2014, from AMOSSHE: The Student Services Organisation: <http://www.amosshe.org.uk>
- AMOSSHE. (2013b, May 30). *Discussion paper: 'Are Students Always Fit to Study?'*. Retrieved July 31, 2014, from AMOSSHE: The Student Services Organisation: <http://www.amosshe.org.uk>
- Bachelard, G. (1994). *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Ball, S. J. (2006). *Education Policy and Social Class*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Ball, S. J. (2012). *Global Education Inc.* London: Routledge.
- Bannet, E. T. (1989). *Structuralism and the Logic of Dissent*. London: The Macmillan Press.
- Barnett, R. (2011). The marketised university: defending the indefensible. In M. Molesworth, R. Scullion, & E. Nixon (Eds.), *The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as Consumer* (pp. 39-51). Oxon: Routledge.
- Barthes, R. (1982/2000). *A Roland Barthes Reader*. (S. Sontag, Ed.) London: Vintage.
- Baudrillard, J. (1983). *Simulations*. (P. Foss, P. Patton, & P. Beitchman, Trans.) New York: Semiotext[e].
- Bauman, Z. (2001). *Community. Seeking safety in an insecure world*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497-529.
- Becker, C. S. (1992). *Living and Relating. An Introduction to Phenomenology*. London: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Bell, J. (2010). *Doing Your Research Project* (5th ed.). Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Belong*. (n.d.). Retrieved 4 23, 2014, from Merriam-Webster: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/belong>
- Belsey, C. (2002). *Poststructuralism. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bernstein, B. (2000). *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: theory, research, critique*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Bertens, J. W. (2001). *Literary Theory: The Basics*. London: Routledge.

- Bigge, R. (2006). The cost of (anti) social networks: Identity, agency and neo-luddites. *First Monday*, 11(12).
- Blaikie, N. (2000). *Designing Social Research*. United Kingdom: Polity Press.
- Blunt, A., & Dowling, R. (2006). *Home*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Boeije, H. (2010). *Analysis in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Bollen, K. A., & Hoyle, R. H. (1990). Perceived Cohesion: A Conceptual and Empirical Examination. *Social Forces*, 69(2), 479-504.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). Forms of Capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241-260). London: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1977). *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. Sage Publications.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bowden, R. (2000). Fantasy Higher Education: University and college league tables. *Quality in Higher Education*, 6(1), 41-60.
- Brown, T., & Jones, L. (2001). *Action research and Postmodernism*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Bryman, A. (2008). *Social Research Methods* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Clegg, S., Bradley, S., & Smith, K. (2007). 'I've had to swallow my pride': help seeking and self-esteem. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 25(02), 101-113.
- Cohen, A. P. (1985). *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. Milton Keynes: The Open University.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., Morrison, K., & Bell, R. (2011). *Research Methods in Education*. London: Routledge.
- Committee on Higher Education. (1963). *Higher education: report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins 1961-63*. London: HMSO.
- Cresswell, T. (2002). Introduction: Theorising Place. In T. Cresswell, & G. Verstraete (Eds.), *Mobilizing Place, Placing Mobility* (pp. 11-32). Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Csordas, T. J. (2012). Psychoanalysis and Phenomenology. *Ethos*, 40(1), 54-74.
- Dalton, J. (2002). The art and practical wisdom of student affairs leadership. *New directions for student services*, 98, 3-10.
- de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dean, J. (2008). Enjoying Neoliberalism. *Cultural Politics*, 4(1), 44-72.

- Delanty, G. (2003). *Community*. London: Routledge.
- Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). (2011). *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*. London: HMSO.
- Department of Education and Science (DES). (1985). *The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s*. London: HMSO.
- Department of Education and Science (DES). (1987). *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge*. London: HMSO.
- Dowling, M. (2004). Hermeneutics: an exploration. *Nurse Researcher*, 11(4), 30-39.
- Dowling, M. (2005). From Husserl to van Manen. A review of different phenomenological approaches. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 131-142.
- Earwaker, J. (1992). *Helping and Supporting Students*. Buckingham, United Kingdom: Open University Press.
- Easthope, A. (1991). *British Post-Structuralism Since 1968*. London: Routledge.
- Ecclestone, K. (2007). Resisting images of the 'diminished self': the implications of emotional well-being and emotional engagement in education policy. *Journal of Education Policy*, 22(4), 455-470.
- Ecclestone, K., & Hayes, D. (2009). *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Evans, M. (2004). *Killing Thinking. The Death of the Universities*. London: Continuum.
- Farrell, M. (2012). *New Perspectives in Special Education*. London: Routledge.
- Foskett, N. (2011). Markets, government, funding and the marketisation of UK Higher Education. In M. Molesworth, R. Scullion, & E. Nixon (Eds.), *The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as Consumer* (pp. 25-38). Oxon: Routledge.
- Freeman, T. M., Anderman, L. H., & Jensen, J. (2007). Sense of Belonging in College Freshmen at the Classroom and Campus Levels. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 75(3), 203-220.
- Frosh, S. (2010). *Psychoanalysis Outside the Clinic*. Hampshire: Palgrave.
- Furedi, F. (2004). The formalisation of relationships in education. In D. Hayes (Ed.), *The RoutledgeFalmer Guide to Key Debates in Education* (pp. 9-11). Oxford: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1976). *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. (D. E. Linge, Ed., & D. E. Linge, Trans.) London: University of California Press.
- Garner, R. (2013, December 22). *More students want to study away from home – despite tuition fees*. Retrieved August 1st, 2015, from The Independent: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/more-students-want-to-study-away-from-home-despite-tuition-fees-9021187.html>



- Garratt, D., & Forrester, G. (2012). *Education Policy Unravelling*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Goble, E., Austin, W., Larsen, D., Kreitzer, L., & Brintnell, E. S. (2012). Habits of Mind and the Split-Mind Effect: When Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software is Used in Phenomenological Research. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 13(2), 1-22.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hausmann, L. R., Ye, F., Schofield, J. W., & Woods, R. L. (2009). Sense of Belonging and Persistence in White and African American First-Year Students. *Research in Higher Education*, 50(7), 649-669.
- Hayes, D. (2004). The therapeutic turn in education. In D. Hayes (Ed.), *The RoutledgeFalmer Guide to Key Debates in Education* (pp. 180-185). Oxford: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Hegarty, P. (2004). *Jean Baudrillard Live Theory*. London: Continuum.
- Heidegger, M. (2011). *Basic writings from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*. (D. Farrell, Ed.) Oxon: Routledge Classics.
- Homer, S. (2005). *Jacques Lacan*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Inhabit*. (n.d.). Retrieved 06 02, 2015, from Oxford Dictionaries: <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/inhabit>
- Jacklin, A., & Robinson, C. (2007). What is meant by 'support' in higher education? Towards a model of academic and welfare support. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 7(2), 114-123.
- Johnson, D. R., Soldner, M., Leonard, J. B., Alvarez, P., Inkelas, K. K., Rowan-Kenyon, H. T., & Longerbeam, S. (2007). Examining Sense of Belonging Among First Year Undergraduates From Different Racial / Ethnic Groups. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48(5), 525-542.
- Karlsson, G. (2010). *Psychoanalysis in a New Light*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lacan, J. ([1966]/2006). *Ecrits*. (B. Fink, Trans.) London: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Lacan, J. ([1975]/1991). *Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 1*. (J.-A. Miller, Ed., & J. Forrester, Trans.) London: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Leathwood, C., & Hey, V. (2009). Gender/ed discourses and emotional sub-texts: theorising emotion in UK higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14(4), 429-440.
- Marginson, S. (1997). Investment in the self: The government of student financing in Australia. *Studies in Higher Education*, 22(2), 119-132.
- Maslow, A. (1970). *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper and Row.

- McGowan, T. (2003). Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes. *Cinema Journal*, 42(3), 27-47.
- McGowan, T. (2007). The temporality of the real: The path to politics in the Constant Gardener. *Film-Philosophy*, 52-73.
- McNay, I. (2005). Higher education communities: divided they fail? *Persepctives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 9(2), 39-44.
- Mudge, S. L. (2008). What is neo-liberalism? *Socio-Economic Review*, 6, 7003-731.
- Murray, S. J. (2003). On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig (review). *SubStance*, 32(1), 158-165.
- Nancy, J.-L. (1991). *The Inoperative Community* (Vol. 76). (P. Connor, Ed., P. Connor, L. Garbus, M. Holland, & S. Sawhney, Trans.) Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Office for Fair Access. (2014). *Office for Fair Access Annual Report and Accounts 2013-14*. UK: Office for Fair Access.
- Oliver, K. (2004). *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A psychoanalytic social theory of oppression*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Olwig, K. F. (1999). Travelling makes a home: mobility and identity among West Indians. In T. Chapman, & J. Hockey (Eds.), *Ideal Homes? Social change and domestic life* (pp. 73-83). London: Routledge.
- O'Rourke, J. (1999). Canaries in the mine? Women's experiences and new learning technologies. In A. Tait, & R. Mills (Eds.), *The Convergence of Distance and Conventional Education* (pp. 100-109). London: Routledge.
- Osterman, K. F. (2000). Students' Need for Belonging in the School Community. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(3), 323-367.
- Pelias, R. J. (2013). Writing Into Position. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (4th ed., pp. 547-568). London: Sage.
- Pittman, L. D., & Richmond, A. (2008). University Belonging, Friendship Quality, and Psychological Adjustment During the Transition to College. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 76(4), 343-361.
- Plato, Grube, G. M., & Reeve, C. D. (1992). *Republic*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Rabate, J.-M. (Ed.). (2003). *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Reay, D. (2001). Finding or losing yourself?: working-class relationships to education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 16(4), 333-346.

- Rees, G., & Stroud, D. (2001). A mass system of higher education. In R. Phillips, & J. Furlong (Eds.), *Education, Reform and the State: Twenty-five Years of Politics, Policy and Practice* (pp. 72-86). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Relph, E. (1976). *Place and Placenessess*. London: Pion Limited.
- Roberts, J. (2005). The Power of the 'Imaginary' in Disciplinary Processes. *Organization*, 12(5), 619-642.
- Robson, C. (2002). *Real World Research* (Vol. 2nd Edition). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Rowe, S., & Wolch, J. (1990). Social Networks in Time and Space: Homeless Women in Skid Row, Los Angeles. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 80(2), 184-204.
- Santner, E. (2001). *On the Psychotheology of Everday Life*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Scott, D. (2000). *Reading Educational Research and Policy*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Seamon, D. (2000). *Phenomenology, Place, Environment, and Architecture: A Review of the Literature*. Retrieved November 2015, 12, from Kansas State University Website: <https://ksu.academia.edu/DavidSeamon>
- Shepherdson, C. (1993). Vital Signs: The place of memory in psychoanalysis. *Research in Phenomenology*, 23(1), 22-72.
- Shepherdson, C. (2008). *Lacan and the Limits of Language*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Shin, J. C., & Jung, J. (2014). Academics job satisfaction and job stress across countries in the changing academic environments. *Higher Education*, 67(5), 603-620.
- Spiegelberg, H. (1982). *The Phenomenological Movement. A historical introduction by Herbert Spiegelberg* (3rd ed.). London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Staddon, E., & Standish, P. (2012). Improving the Student Experience. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 46(4), 631-648.
- Stoller, S. (2009). Phenomenology and the Poststructural Critique of Experience. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 17(5), 707-737.
- Stronach, I. C., McNamara, O., Stark, S., & Warne, T. (2002). Towards an uncertain politics of professionalism: teacher and nurse identities. *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(1), 109-138.
- Student*. (n.d.). Retrieved 06 02, 2015, from Oxford Dictionaries: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/student>
- Tait, A. (2004). On Institutional Models and Concepts of Student Support Services: The Case of the Open University UK. In J. D. Brindley, C. Walti, & O. Zawacki-Richter (Eds.), *Learner Support in Open, Distance and Online Learning Environments* (Vol. 9, pp. 283-294). Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag der.

- Thomas, L. (2002). Student retention in higher education: the role of institutional habitus. *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(4), 423-442.
- Thomas, L. (2012). *What Works? Student Retention and Success. Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change*. Higher Education Academy.
- Thomas, L., & Hixenbaugh, P. (2006). *Personal tutoring in higher education*. Trentham Books.
- Thomas, M. E. (2007). The Implications of Psychoanalysis for Qualitative Methodology: The Case of Interviews and Narrative Data Analysis. *The Professional Geographer*, 59(4), 537-546.
- Throop, C. J. (2012). On Inaccessibility and Vulnerability: Some Horizons of Compatibility between Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis. *Ethos*, 40(1), 75-96.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research. *Review of Educational Research*, 89-125.
- Tinto, V. (2007). Research and Practice of Student Retention: What Next? *Journal of College Student Retention*, 8(1), 1-19.
- Tuan, Y.-F. (1975). Place: An Experiential Perspective. *Geographical Review*, 65(2), 151-165.
- van Manen, M. (2007). Phenomenology of Practice. *Phenomenology & Practice*, 1(1), 11-30.
- van Manen, M. (2011, October 26). *Phenomenological inquiry is practised as phenomenological writing*. Retrieved from Phenomenology Online: <http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/writing/>
- VanderStoep, S. W., & Johnston, D. D. (2009). *Research Methods for Everyday Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Vrasti, W. (2011). "Caring" Capitalism and the Duplicity of Critique. *Theory & Event*, 14(4).
- Walsh, M., Stephens, P., & Moore, S. (2000). *Social Policy and Welfare*. Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes.
- Whitchurch, C. (2008). Shifting Identities and Blurring Boundaries: the Emergence of Third Space Professionals in UK Higher Education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62(4), 277-396.
- Ziarek, E. P. (2011). From the Rhetoric of War to the Ethics of Witnessing: The Political Stakes of Kelly Oliver's Philosophy. *Philosophy Today*, 55, 28-31.
- Zizek, S. (1989). *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso.